

Barefoot on needles, glass and wire

Child labour on dump sites

Poverty drives many children to scavenge at dumping sites. **Jo-Anne Collinge** describes this hazardous work and why children do it. She also looks at some important projects that are imaginatively trying to address this form of child labour.

“There were about 20 children at the entrance to the site. Children were chasing trucks and vans, jumping onto the backs of moving vehicles and picking material off them. Everything from industrial sludge and ash to medical waste was being dumped. They scavenged off the back of trucks without gloves or masks, and ran around barefoot where medical IV units were found lying on the ground as well as needles, glass and wire.”

This is how researchers described child dump scavengers at the Boipetshe dumping site in southern Gauteng.

Scavengers. Waste pickers. Recyclers. These are different names for people whose survival depends on collecting rubbish for use, and as materials for recycling, from rubbish bins, waste dumps and the landfills (rubbish dumps) of our towns and cities.

About one out of every four people involved in waste picking at garbage dumps and landfill sites is a child aged between five and 18 years, according to a study commissioned by the programme Towards the Elimination of worst forms of Child Labour (TECL), a joint project of the South African government and the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

The study involved visits to 17

landfills and dumpsites in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal and interviews with 75 children working at five of these sites.

It found that the average child waste picker is around 15 years of age, already has a few years' experience in the work, and puts in between three to eight hours a day at the dump. The young people juggle school attendance with work and are unlikely to earn more than R200 a week by selling recyclable materials.

WHO ARE THESE CHILDREN?

Are these children orphans, runaways, victims of neglect? No, for the most part they live with one or both of their parents. The TECL study found there was a good chance the parents were also sifting through the dumpsites daily for the means to survive. Or some parents were in low paying jobs, such as in agriculture or domestic service or living on small state pensions. The children undertook the dangerous activity of waste picking because the family simply could not survive otherwise. About one out of three children in the study said that they ate the food that they salvaged from the garbage.

The situation was captured by a 13-year-old from Mzunduzi in KwaZulu-Natal: “My mother works very hard and earns very little. It is

my responsibility to help. When there is no food to eat, my mother and I go to the dump to look for food.”

CREATING DECENT WORK

TECL chief technical advisor Dawie Bosch commented: “Child labour is almost always a manifestation of poverty and any strategy to eliminate child labour must be rooted in action to combat poverty.”

The situation of child waste pickers highlights the need not only to generate work opportunities for adults, but to pay a living wage for that work. In the short to medium term, this includes recognising waste picking as a legitimate economic activity and regulating it by means of labour law.”

The ILO, which has been the focus of global efforts to eradicate child labour, has clearly repositioned its International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour firmly within its worldwide campaign for decent work for adults.

It might seem an impossible task to create “decent work” from the dirty, dangerous and often degrading activity of salvaging materials from waste. But, in a country that has been slow to embrace the need to conserve resources, the contribution of waste pickers is important. South Africa manages to recycle only one-third of the paper, board, glass,



plastic and tin it uses unlike many other countries.

“Without waste pickers South Africa’s recycling record would be abysmal, yet they are paid a mere pittance for their efforts. The experience of Brazil shows that this need not be the case. Waste recovery can provide a living wage and people who are widely seen as scavengers can organise themselves into waste recovery enterprises,” explains Bosch.

In Brazil, where waste pickers, or *catadores*, are estimated to number some 300 000, the National Movement for *Catadores* (NMC) has focused on negotiating better rates for recyclable materials. It has also created cooperatives that have taken on some of the functions of the recycling process. Cooperatives have been able to raise loans to buy weighing machines, metal presses and paper shredders. This enables them to sell materials at a higher rate and pay their members wages which are in excess of the minimum wage.

TAKING ACTION

The TECL undertook the study on child labour at waste sites to inform the Child Labour Programme of Action (CLPA). The Department of Labour is driving this national plan, but it depends on the active involvement of a range of national and provincial government departments, municipalities,

organised business and labour, and the non-government organisation (NGO) sector.

The CLPA is designed to complement national policy and acknowledges that the long-term waste management strategy of government is separation of recyclable materials at the point of consumption – that is, households and businesses must separate their rubbish, it should not happen at dumpsites and landfills.

However, in the short to medium term, the CLPA endorses the recommendation of TECL that the children should be removed from dumpsites and adult waste pickers should be employed to increase their income and improve the conditions in which they work.

Concrete steps to achieve this would include forming a forum that involves relevant government departments and major recycling companies in order to improve the rates paid to adults involved in selling materials for recycling. Government must also enforce health and safety regulations throughout the waste recovery sector.

The CLPA also focuses on enforcing provisions on hazardous work and children. This would mean banning children from waste picking at landfills and dumpsites through the use of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA). The BCEA

prohibits any child under the age of 18 years from participating in work that is dangerous or that harms the child’s education, health or mental, physical or social development.

Regulations under the BCEA will set out in detail what “hazardous” work means. These regulations will hopefully be promulgated before the end of 2008 and will give labour inspectors much clearer guidance on when to take action.

“Even if we were to succeed in creating viable and substantially safer work for adult waste pickers and to clear the dumpsites of child labourers, we would still face a range of social problems,” Bosch points out. “And it’s critical that we don’t dismiss these as unimportant. In fact, the availability of appropriate social services is almost a pre-condition for removing children from waste sites.”

Although most children interviewed in the study attended school, a significant minority had dropped out and could not simply go back to school after years out of the classroom. “We need to find a way to give them skills for regular employment. Otherwise they are likely to drift into some other form of child labour, possibly more exploitative than scavenging.”

LOCAL SUCCESS

At some dumpsites, hundreds of people live in makeshift shelters at

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the edge of a sea of waste. “There is no sense, and no integrity, in stopping these children from working at dumpsites because of the health hazards involved and then turning a blind eye to the fact that they are eating, sleeping and breathing these same hazards by living amid waste,” says Bosch.

The task may seem overwhelmingly complex, but Oupa Loate, manager at the Palm Springs landfill site in Emfuleni, Gauteng, has shown what can be done. When he arrived at the site in 2006 he found 200 adults and 50 children scavenging there and, in some cases, living on the site in a cluster of shacks. Every kind of waste was dumped there, including food, medical waste and body parts.

Loate applied for a licence and for permission to allow waste picking at the site. He then took the following steps.

He registered all the adult waste pickers, providing them with identity cards, and prohibited children from working on the site. Then he formed waste pickers into teams and established a system of shifts. This eliminated the uncontrolled, competitive scavenging that existed.

After this he set aside a separate area for sorting waste and arranged for recycling companies to collect the waste on site. This meant waste pickers no longer hauled heavy loads over long distances. He negotiated

standard rates for materials purchased from the sites so that nobody was underpaid.

Loate ensured that waste pickers got protective clothing and conducted health and safety training. He also negotiated with the municipality to house people living on the site in Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses.

Loate’s active management of the waste picking enterprise resulted in the monthly income of individual waste pickers increasing from between R2 000 and R5 000 a month. With better earnings, families could do without their children’s labour and they could afford to send them to school.

The TECL study reports that Loate’s transformation efforts were met initially with “resistance, hostility and aggression”. But he persisted – and talked... and talked... and talked to win cooperation and support.

The Luijpaardsvlei landfill site in Mogale City followed a slightly different route under the supervision of the municipality. The site had become home to a squatter community of some 1 000 people who had no access to piped water, electricity or sanitation. The water authorities wanted to close it down because it posed a pollution threat to water sources.

After moving the community into a serviced informal settlement, the municipality identified 120 people who were most in need of work as “reclaimers”. They were registered and each was given access to a particular section of the site.

The municipality appointed a private company to manage the site and contracted a single recycling company to buy back materials. This company weighed the materials at a demarcated site and paid waste pickers according to a standard rate under the watchful eye of the

municipality.

The average monthly income for waste pickers rose to R4 000 in 2007. This was enough to sustain their families. Children were no longer allowed on the landfill site.

The workers formed a committee to protect their interests and this committee was represented on a broader Landfill Site Monitoring Committee that brought together representatives of surrounding communities, environmental groups and the municipality.

The waste pickers then set their sights on forming a “reclaimers cooperative”, which would give them more control over their earnings, and the municipality supported this by providing basic business training.

The site has now been rehabilitated and no longer threatens to pollute water sources. By recycling 40% of waste, the waste pickers have extended the life of the landfill by ten years.

“What is striking about these local interventions is that they combine the notion of decent work for adults, with the principle of protecting children from harmful work and the provision of supportive services,” observes Bosch. “Until our municipalities are able to give effect to the national waste strategy of separating materials at source for recycling, we need to pursue solutions similar to these on a wider scale.” LB

Jo-Anne Collinge provides a communication service to TECL. The article draws on ‘Rapid assessment of scavenging and waste recycling work by children in South Africa’, by Saranel Benjamin. (TECL and the Department of Labour, 2007 www.child-labour.org.za/south-africa/documents-and-laws/research-reports/)