

South Africa's waste pickers

Creating jobs and fighting poverty

Scavengers on dump sites are reviled. But says **Musa Chamane** waste pickers are fighting back. With help from groundWork they are becoming informed and organising all over South Africa to protect their livelihoods.

groundWork is an environmental justice organisation based in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, which works mainly on industrial pollution issues. Its strategy is to assist in organising with community people and labour to best resist environmental injustices and environmental racism.

MAKING WASTE PICKERS LEGAL

groundWork has been working with community people since 1999 to reverse the old apartheid practice of placing waste dumpsites in black community areas. This is environmental racism, where black people have to bear a big environmental burden for the sake of 'development'.

Examples of this practice abound in South Africa. Townships such as Umlazi, Mdantsane, Soweto and Sobantu have all had landfill sites placed in their neighbourhoods. In the past this was waste from white areas and now waste from middle-class areas is being dumped near townships.

Waste dumps are where domestic waste is compacted and buried. It is a place that you can smell kilometres away, due to the burning or rotting of waste. It is a place that

not only attracts humans but also animals such as dogs, cats, livestock and birds. Competition is a way of life, and it is not uncommon for an animal to be competing with a human for old food.

In 2006 the United Nations' International Labour Organisation (ILO) commissioned research into child labour globally. The research in South Africa focused on waste pickers.

While groundWork was assisting with the research it became clear that waste pickers were earning a legitimate livelihood while providing an important service to society. They sorted and diverted waste such as plastic, paper, metal and glass from landfill sites so that the society could recycle and reuse it. As global resources become scarce, the function of recycling has become ever more important.

At the same time as this research groundWork was busy working with community people from throughout South Africa to respond to the National Environmental Management: Waste Bill. Up until March 2009, South Africa never had a dedicated waste act dealing with industrial and domestic waste.

It was during the mobilisation to make inputs to the Waste Bill that

groundWork started working to ensure that waste pickers were not excluded from the new legislation. The Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) deputy director general, Joanne Yawitch, was adamant that DEAT would not allow people to remove waste from landfill sites. This was despite these people earning an income via this difficult and often dangerous task.

groundWork realised that the only way to convince the DEAT against the irrational decision was to make sure that it was challenged in Parliament. This community people and groundWork did. The Portfolio Committee on Environment and Tourism then instructed the DEAT to include language in the Bill that would secure the rights of waste pickers, rather than leave them without protection from being removed from their legitimate livelihood.

The Bill was presented to the President of the Republic towards the end of last year for approval. groundWork has since worked with waste pickers in various places to inform them of their rights and to start assisting them to organise so that they can voice resistance to local municipal managers who, like the DEAT, do not want them on waste sites.

COMMUNICATING PICKERS' RIGHTS

Waste pickers are very much against being called scavengers. I sympathise with them because this term is insulting. Pickers, for some, are worthless people and waste pickers feel that they are often treated as waste. Sometimes when waste pickers want to speak to the

landfill management, they get answers like “there is nothing one can talk about with scavengers”.

Over the last year groundWork has commissioned research into the situation of waste in South Africa and specifically on waste pickers. The *groundWork Report 2009: Wasting the Nation*, gives a clear understanding of the politics of waste in South Africa.

The mining industry and industry in general produce more than 85% of South Africa’s waste, but are the least regulated in managing this waste.

A second research piece, *Reclaiming Livelihoods*, documented how waste pickers have been persecuted by authorities. It also records how privatisation and business is muscling in on the turf of waste pickers, creating conditions of unemployment and linking people to exploitative middle companies who make the profit.

groundWork has taken this research, which has been done with waste pickers and people in the Vaal Triangle, Pietermaritzburg and Durban, and has started travelling around South Africa to share this information with pickers in as many areas as possible.

LIFE AS A WASTE PICKER

The conditions of waste pickers is very precarious. In some areas municipal action has resulted in security companies shooting waste pickers as they earn a living. For some bizarre reason, rather than making the workplace safer for pickers, municipalities, which often own landfill sites, spend millions on hiring security companies to exclude pickers from the sites that contain only things that have been thrown away.

In conveying the message to waste pickers that they have rights, especially now that they are defined in the Waste Act, groundWork has visited six provinces and 48 waste sites in more than 40 towns, municipalities and metros.

In visiting places like Johannesburg to Mdantsane, Pietermaritzburg to Zeerust and Mafikeng there is a reality that awaits you. Waste pickers are discriminated against. As waste is discarded, so South Africa’s waste pickers are often discarded by the system.

Theirs is an untold story, as most people have never set foot on a dumpsite. In these areas we find whole families from sons to

daughters, mothers, brothers and even children. Working at the dumpsite is not about collecting outdated or decaying food. People at landfills are there mainly to reclaim recyclable materials such as metals, cardboards, plastic and paper.

South Africa has an at least 40% unemployment rate. Therefore, people who pick at these dumps have identified an opportunity to make a living. Waste pickers are hopeful of a better life. They are people who believe in working hard to earn a living. People who will do whatever it takes to protect their livelihoods.

Waste pickers are engaged in different actions in resisting the challenge to their livelihoods.

In Pietermaritzburg in particular pickers have demanded access to the landfill or, alternatively, that the municipality employ all of them. They took to the street in protest against their brutal treatment by private security. There is now unlimited access of waste pickers to the landfill even though they are still waiting for formal approval from the municipality.

The life and social fabric on waste sites is complex. There are social layers as to who has access to what waste. There are people who come from shacks while others come from the nearest townships. In some cases people live on the waste sites, and children know of no other place.

At times both parents of a household work at the dump and the money they earn feeds the whole family and pays the school fees. In terms of earnings, it will depend on what is reclaimed as well as broader economy demand factors at the time. It is not uncommon for waste pickers to make more than R2 500 per month from the work that they do.



groundWork

GLOBAL STRUGGLE

Waste pickers in South Africa are not isolated in their struggle. There is a growing global movement of pickers who are becoming more organised to ensure that, as a sector of society providing a legitimate service, they are recognised.

So, from West Africa to Egypt, from India to Brazil and from the Philippines to Denmark, waste pickers and recyclers are organising to have a stronger voice. In Denmark there are no waste pickers on waste sites, but there are community centres where waste is collected, recycled and resold back into society in a formal manner.

groundWork is working globally and within Africa to ensure that waste pickers in South Africa are part of this movement. In December 2008 groundWork took three waste picker representatives from South Africa on a ten-day visit to India to visit pickers there and to better understand the global politics of waste.

Building on this visit, and visits to provinces over the last five months, groundWork will be hosting a national meeting in June 2009 for waste pickers from throughout South Africa. Here we hope there will be discussion on organising collectively to build solidarity and resist neo-liberal policies which will exclude waste pickers from work.

Will the new law and the new government provide waste pickers a legitimacy in South Africa? That is a big question that we, together with waste pickers, have to make happen rather than waiting for government to decide.

The solution for waste issues in this country rests with people who understand the subject better than anyone else. The waste pickers are part of a solution to this problem because they are already contributing towards the South African economy



groundWork

through the recycling industry.

If municipalities would learn from other more enlightened municipalities, the issue of waste management could be solved through waste recycling. Recycling creates employment for the poor and the unemployed. Municipalities need to broaden their minds when thinking about waste. There is no need for the growing number of landfill sites. Waste transfer centres and waste recycling centres and separation at source is the way to go.

Before waste is shipped to a landfill, it needs to be sorted and all the recyclables recovered. Then a lesser amount of waste will go to a landfill site. Municipalities will save space at the landfill and at the same time jobs will be created for the pickers who have greater experience in recovery than anyone else.

It pains me to see communities in so much poverty when there is something that the government can do. Waste pickers need to be formally recognised as they are in countries such as Brazil and India.

In Brazil there is a national waste pickers' association. Anything to do with waste management is dealt with by waste pickers and they even get a small subsidy from government. The

costs incurred by the Brazilian government have been very minimal since the waste pickers' association was recognised. In Brazil the recycling rate is greater than 60% and this saves the government millions.

South Africa has a lesson to learn from other nations. And we need to learn fast because we have a commitment as a country that by 2012, we will halve waste going to the landfill (Polokwane Declaration 2001). LB

Musa Chamane works at groundWork as waste campaign manager. He has been involved in Environmental Impact Assessment studies, mostly for Umgeni Water pipelines. He has also been involved in projects around sustainable coastal livelihoods for DEAT and community development workers' training for Traditional and Local Government.

For the groundwork reports he refers to see:

<http://www.groundwork.org.za/Publications/gWReport2008.pdf> and

<http://www.groundwork.org.za/Publications/Reclaiming%20Livelihoods.pdf>