

Unsung recycling heroes, waste reclaimers feel lockdown pinch

By [Mologadi Makwela](#)

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We don't typically pay much attention to waste reclaimers.

Yes, they're ubiquitous, seen carting around, often in 'commandeered' supermarket trollies, their cardboard and plastic and metal cargo around our streets. We can spot them salvaging waste from bins, sidewalks or landfill sites.



Image via [DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security/ Nampak Limited](#)

Hardly noteworthy stuff, we would think. But the truth is that waste reclaimers – sometimes referred to as waste 'pickers' – may well be the unsung heroes of our global recycling efforts.

In South Africa alone, an army of them – estimates number them at anything between 35,000 to 200,000 – collect some 90% of the country's recyclable materials off landfill sites. In doing so, they also save municipalities around R700 million in landfill 'airspace', i.e. the volume of space dedicated to solid waste.

Yet for all that, waste reclaimers make only modest livelihoods at best. As shows ongoing research funded by the Centre of Excellence in Food Security (CoE-FS) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC).

Depending on how good or bad things go on any particular site or day, they can earn – based on interviews she conducted towards the end of 2016 – between R300 to R800 a week, reports social worker Dr Naome Mudavanhu. For her doctoral research, Mudavanhu had that year interviewed well over 100 waste reclaimers across four landfill sites and one material recovery facility in the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape and the North-West Province.

Often feeding large families, that money doesn't go far. Especially not for food, which was either purchased with their meagre earnings or recovered from landfill sites and elsewhere. Most get to eat regularly, but a number of the waste reclaimers that Mudavanhu interviewed reported that they go without food for at least some part of the month.

Challenges are an accepted part to waste reclaimers' lives, she also points out. They labour under often dangerous working conditions, lack of structural support – such as through the provision of water or sanitation, even shade – varied from site to site, and any sense of dignity was largely dependent on how well or poorly municipalities treat them. But they persevere, says Mudavanhu.

“ Despite the hardships, working on unbearable working conditions and poor income, landfill waste reclaimers have managed to sustain their livelihoods ”

But those already insecure livelihoods took a further knock over the Covid-19 lockdowns. Landfill sites and recycling buy-back centres (BBCs), to whom they sell their collections, were per government regulations obliged to shut their gates and doors, almost overnight cutting off the reclaimers' incomes. What's more, as informal workers, waste reclaimers fell through the cracks of the social protection system, unable to benefit from the relief grants and programmes that government put in place for those in the formal sector who had lost their jobs over the pandemic.

At that point, several organisations in the sector stepped in to assist. But even their generous contributions – the packaging sector raised around R750,000, for instance – could stretch only so far.

Despite the informality of their occupations, waste reclaimers are hailed as entrepreneurs and key players in the waste management sector by many, including Professor Catherina Schenck, who holds the South African Research Chair Initiative (SARChI) chair in waste and society at UWC.

"They are an integral part of the value and service chain," says Schenck, who with Professor Rina Swart of UWC's School of Public Health had supervised Mudavanhu's research. Schenck had also alongside colleagues at the University of Johannesburg, North-West University and UWC conducted larger studies that focused on food security among waste reclaimers.

But waste reclaimers' pivotal role is neither recognised nor rewarded, certainly not when measured in terms of food security, say researchers.

If they are able to, almost without fail, find food on the landfill sites, that food is neither safe nor sustainable, notes Schenck. Nor, the research group found in a 2018 study, do waste reclaimers consume enough food, much less the right (nutritional) kinds of foods.

One move that could offer greater income security and more agency to fend for themselves, and lend greater dignity to their labours, would be to acknowledge and integrate the work that waste reclaimers do, suggest Schenck and others. As their role in the multi-billion-rand industry is typically underplayed or glossed over, municipalities and others are under no obligation to provide any real structural support.

But that 'informality' misrepresents their place in the sector, says Schenck. "The waste reclaimer is not separate from the

formal system. They move outside of the formal system, but they are linked to it."

Increased integration could also offer some protection come the next pandemic or crisis. In the light of the elevated food insecurity over the past months, that would be a step in the right direction.

WATCH | Professor Rinie Schenck highlights the risks posed by the 2020 lockdown on waste pickers:

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