

# Waste pickers deserve more recognition for their contribution to the environment

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They're at work before the crack of dawn until long after most other citizens have gone to bed. And yet waste pickers are viewed as an irritation by many who see them going through their rubbish bins. *"Instead of getting annoyed, people should be thankful for the difference these pickers make in our environment and economy",* says Mpendulo Ginindza, Vice President of the Institute of Waste Management of Southern Africa (IWMSA). *"According to the CSIR, in 2014 alone, the informal pickers saved municipalities R309 million to R748 million in landfill airspace. This, by simply diverting recyclables away from landfills."*

According to the South African Waste Pickers Association, South Africa has more than 90 000 waste pickers, and Ginindza says that it is estimated that a single picker can divert 16 to 24 tons each year. *"Plastics SA reported, in 2018, that the majority of recyclable plastic collected was sourced from formal collectors. Formal collectors typically source their recyclables from waste pickers and buy-and-drop centres."*

## A day in the life of a waste picker

A waste picker is defined as someone who collects reusable and recyclable materials from residential and commercial waste bins, landfill sites and open spaces in order to revalue them and generate an income. Ginindza says she interviewed a female waste picker from Limpopo about her typical day. *"She told me competition is rife, and she has to wake up at 4 am to be on site by 5 am. When she arrives, she sorts the waste and weighs the materials. When there is enough, she transports it to the drop-off centre for formal collection."*

Whether waste pickers work in a rural or urban environment, the fact remains that this is no easy job. *"They are the first people on the road early in the morning. They sort through bins and carry the heavy*

*waste on their trollies. Often, they don't have the proper equipment, and environmental conditions are not safe. Not to mention what they come across in the bins."*

## How can you help?

Although the industry itself is regulated, Ginindza points out that many waste pickers are informal workers. *"A number of municipalities have attempted to integrate informal workers, but with mixed success rates."* She also points to the Waste Pickers Integration Guideline for South Africa, produced by the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries in 2020. *"It provides guidance to municipalities and industry on measures to improve their working conditions."*

Legislation also plays a role. *"In May 2021, the Extended Producer Responsibility Regulations came into effect. [Their] purpose is support, recognition and compensation for the work that is done by pickers along the waste value chain",* Ginindza says. But individuals can also assist by making life easier for waste pickers, she adds. *"Start by separating your waste at home and at work. Avoid putting dangerous or hazardous items that they may come across when looking for recyclables in your bins. And, of course, be more tolerant and patient on the road or on the street the next time you meet a waste picker at work",* she concludes.

For more information on IWMSA please visit:

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