

The war on waste pickers

January 17 2020, by Tamsin Oxford



Credit: Daniel Born

The man in the tattered shirt, biceps bulging as he pulls an enormous bag of waste behind him on a trolley. The blaring horns as cars slide by, annoyed at the intrusion in their lane. The furtive WhatsApp messages on community channels, "Are these waste pickers dangerous? I don't like them digging through my trash ..."

These are the responses that marginalise a community that has grown out of discarded waste, the dumpster, and the [landfill site](#)—reclaimers, or waste pickers, are people with extraordinary expertise that have saved

the government up to R748 million in landfill airspace and put South Africa's [recycling](#) economy on par with Europe.

The invisible vital

"The reclaimers collect around 80 to 90 percent of all post-consumer packaging and paper left behind. If they stopped tomorrow, there would be no [recycling industry](#) in South Africa," says Dr. Melanie Samson, a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography in the School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies at Wits.

"They are the unseen but essential connection between the waste management system and the economy and they're subsidising the entire thing. They're not being paid for the work that they do, only a very small portion of the sale price on the recyclables they collect. Considering how much money they save government, they are performing a critical role and yet they are largely stigmatised and harassed and not seen as people."

Skilled city surfers

Samson began researching waste reclaimers in the early 2000s, initially focusing on gender, race, and the privatisation of waste management. In 2008, she started working with waste reclaimers in South Africa and globally, expanding her research to focus on forms of dispossession and inclusion. For Samson, the waste pickers [have stepped into a gap left behind by a lazy population](#) that doesn't separate at source (SAS) and the waste pickers have created an entire recycling economy built on their expertise.

"People think of them as crazy, poor, dirty and uneducated people who scramble through the trash to eke out a living," she says. "We need to change this perception. They are not marginal and they do not need to be

eradicated. We are not the experts, they are. Refusing to acknowledge their skills and ingenuity is a form of colonial thinking that has to change."

Reclaiming participation

With a team of 16 graduate and postgraduate students, Samson has [conducted in-depth research into what waste picker integration](#) would mean for residents, officials and the pickers themselves. The data will inform national guidelines for a system to integrate and empower waste pickers. The team collaborates with reclaimers directly to generate information about the contributions they make and the work that they do.

"Conversations about waste picker integration have always been about helping reclaimers to integrate their unpaid labour into a new, formal municipal recycling system," says Samson. "I turned this on its head and asked: How can government and industry integrate into the fantastic, well-functioning, SAS system that the waste reclaimers have already created? We need to recognise and build on what they have done, there's no reason to start from scratch."

The national guidelines are focused on what already exists within the recycling economy and how these can be effectively integrated into a more formal system. Analyses of what's happening on the ground by Samson and her team enable the development of a participatory regulatory policy in collaboration with the waste pickers themselves.

Capitalist exploitation

"Governments don't pay attention to these informal economies, often going in to situations like this and acting as if there's no system already

in place, creating new systems with private companies. Nobody recognises the impact that this has on the waste reclaimers and their lives. These people do so much and yet they are deeply and profoundly exploited," says Samson.

When government contracts private companies to take on the SAS role, the income of the waste pickers can decrease by more than a third. They end up living in parks and waking at 3am just to beat the trucks. Not only does privatisation impact their quality of life, it also doesn't work—when [private companies](#) take on the role, recycling levels drop because these companies are paid a fixed rate per household, whether or not they collect the waste. It just costs the government money and the waste pickers their dignity.

"If we focus on what the [waste](#) pickers already know then we can build a better understanding of our recycling economy and change their lives," says Samson. "They are skilled knowledge-workers who separate our materials for us and the city. They turn our rubbish into a thriving recycling economy, which begs the question—who really are the dirty ones?"

Provided by Wits University

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