Northern Landfill Site in Mangaung

Photo Essay

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A hot wind is whipping red, blue and black plastic bags along with whatever paper will float in fine-dust eddies across the low, wide landfill site. The smell of dust, acrid indefinable organic matter and coal dust (from the adjacent yard) greets the women and men who are walking through the entrance gate of the Northern Landfill site.
How waste enters the landfill

Trucks and bakkies come in to dump waste throughout the day. Some of these are municipal vehicles. But there are also many private vehicles carrying household waste or waste from commercial outlets.
Five municipal workers are in the new site office that overlooks the weighbridge. But the weighbridge is not working, so they have to estimate the weight of materials entering the landfill. As they do not have computers, they have to make hand-written records of the estimated weights and types of materials.
Approach: Cooperatives

Of the 60 plus waste pickers who work at this site, about half work within a cooperative. There are three active cooperatives whose members pool their materials and sell together. At month end the combined earnings from these sales are used to pay expenses such as transport costs and the cooperative members split the profits. Other waste pickers work independently.

The organisation of cooperatives has assisted waste pickers in having a voice in negotiations and facilitated their access to some opportunities. However, they have experienced exploitation by at least one private contractor.
Bulldozer operator Elliot Ramahlape is standing next to his vehicle. He says the vehicle operators and waste pickers work well together. He says 'We give the recyclers a chance to take stuff before we push the materials. He's been driving the bulldozer for 3 years. He left to work in a retail store to train as a driver of earth moving vehicles.
Idle vehicles
But several earthmoving vehicles are stationary on the landfill. It seems there is no diesel. An official says of the municipal vehicles, ‘It’s been a few weeks now, that they don’t have diesel. Sometimes they get diesel from the fire department’.
Women waste pickers are changing and getting ready for their day's work. They rub a clay and calamine mixture on their skins for sun protection.
Pulling waste from freshly dumped piles

Waste pickers rush towards the municipal trucks or private vehicles that are dumping waste.
Pulling waste from freshly dumped piles

The reclaiming task at the landfill site starts with pulling waste from the dump trucks and the bakkies that are off-loading. They pull waste from the piles or straight from the vehicles to fill their bags.
Waste pickers fill their bags and take these to areas around the main face of the landfill site.
Sorting
There they separate out the different types of material, crush or squash it, and place it in separate large bags. This is the condition in which buyers will collect the material and transport it to buy back centres.
Solomon Mafabatho focuses on salvaging metal. He collects metal sheets, sand poles and objects as well as cables. He cuts the plastic covering off cables or burns them to extract the metal and especially copper wire.
Buyers

‘Buyers come every day,’ says Francelina of the trucks that arrive to collect the sorted material that waste pickers store in large bags. ‘Some pay cash, others deposit money into our bank accounts.’ Sometimes waste pickers go with buyers to buy back centres where the material is weighed.
SAWPA organising waste pickers

Lefa Mononga is the chairperson of the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA). Lefa is the go-to person on this landfill.

He often stands in for officials when there are visitors or researchers to be shown around. He is the main link between waste pickers and external organisations and between waste pickers and the municipality. He is committed to working in teams.
Social services
Today the local clinic service is arriving to offer vaccinations against COVID-19.
Waste picker needs

Some waste pickers at the landfill site have been given personal protective equipment (PPE) by several groups including the municipality and the UN agency UNIDO. Their priorities now are to get equipment for baling and compacting recyclables, transport to move waste to buy back centres, and agreements to collect materials from businesses and shops.