

Lefa Mononga



A natural leader

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Lefa Mononga is the chairperson of the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA). He has previously been the national coordinator.

Working together is something Lefa and his twin brother Mojalefa have always done. By the time the brothers matriculated in 2004 they were orphaned. Their mother had died in 2001 and their father, who had been ill, died in 2004. The boys had already had to take on responsibility for a lot of their own wellbeing since the family was reliant on their father's modest social grant. Lefa says they felt peer pressure to dress well and to have nice things for school but knew they couldn't afford those things. It was that urge that first brought them to this very landfill site. In those days it was an illegal dumping site. Their uncle lived nearby and the boys would come here to dig for school stationery.

'After matric we had to stand up as brothers and fend for ourselves,' says Lefa. Both young men started working for a construction company. When that work ended, they got short-term work through government's Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) building storage and dormitories for soldiers. Their next job was as cleaners at a high school. When they were offered permanent position the wage

offer was very minimal – R100 a day. The brothers decided to rather try their hand at waste picking. That was in 2008. The landfill site was chaotic. There was a lot of conflict, security guards were brutalising waste pickers, and there was gangsters and theft. A waste picker leader who was retiring said, "We need a committee to speak for us. I see you are a serious person."

Lefa joined a small group who called waste pickers together and began talks with the municipality. The municipality wanted the waste pickers to work in cooperatives. Lefa and others organised themselves and others into cooperatives. But there was little guidance on how to run them. A group of 60 people was organised into a cooperative. But Lefa says it didn't work. The group was too large. It was better to break the coop up and for people to choose whom they want to work with. In this way two smaller coops were established.

Nor did the municipality provide equipment or assistance for cooperatives to function more effectively. 'Even now the municipality does not have a database of reclaimers,' says Lefa. Lefa joined SAWPA in 2009. In 2016 Lefa was selected to participate in a SAWPA exchange programme. He was invited to Sweden to learn about their separation at source programme. It's a programme based on households

separating all their waste into two bins and on private contractors removing materials. Lefa was impressed at the knowledge that ordinary households have about wet and dry waste. And he was interested to see how even wet waste is recycled and used for biogas.' The landfill sites are clean. 'They have no plastics lying around,' says Lefa. It's a massive contrast to the Northern Landfill Site, which has a vast amount of plastic floating in all directions.

Lefa is married and has one child. His wife is studying at hotel school. She is currently doing her internship and has almost completed her degree. 'She's on her way because of this job,' says Lefa, referring to his work at the landfill site.