

# Municipal Officials and Waste Picker Integration

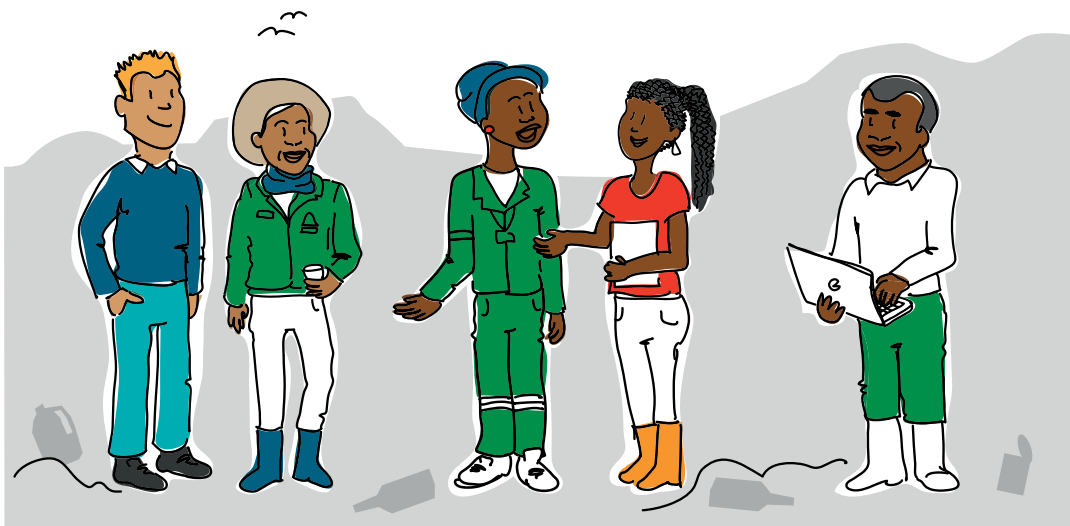
Waste picker integration is a new mandate for municipalities, but that doesn't mean that engaging waste pickers is new to municipalities.

## Many municipal departments relate to waste pickers

Officials from a number of municipal departments have interacted with waste pickers for many years. This is because waste pickers are part of the social and economic fabric of cities and towns across the country, and also because of the many ways that waste pickers' separation outside source system to collect recyclables overlaps with official solid waste management and recycling systems.

### For example:

- Waste management officials interact with waste pickers working at landfills, in the streets, and in public spaces. Some may have tried to work with and support waste pickers. Others may have tried to remove waste pickers and prevent them from working.
- Officials in waste management and local economic development (LED) departments may be involved in projects to train and support waste pickers or integrate them into recycling programmes.



- Officials in waste management and LED departments may support community cooperatives or small, medium and micro-enterprises (SMMEs) to establish buy back centres that they assume waste pickers will sell materials to.
- If the municipality runs separation at source programmes with private companies and/or non-waste picker cooperatives, it is likely that waste pickers have continued to salvage materials in these areas and tensions have arisen between waste pickers and the separation at source contractors.
- Officials working in parks departments interact with waste pickers who sort recyclables and sleep in parks.
- Street waste pickers haul their trolleys in public streets and sometimes surf down hills at great speed, bringing them into contact with traffic officials.
- Some residents call police to remove waste pickers from their suburbs or if they suspect waste pickers have been involved in crimes.
- Officials in environment departments may have partnered with waste pickers for clean-up days.
- Officials in environment departments may have seen waste pickers as creating environmental hazards and tried to limit their work.
- The municipality may have established a waste picker forum or held meetings with waste picker representatives.
- Waste pickers and their organisations may have sought to have meetings with the municipality, mobilised to protest municipal policies, programmes and contracts, and/or submitted proposals to improve their relationships with the municipality and their place in the waste management and recycling systems.

*‘Waste picker integration is not something that the Solid Waste Department on our own can do. We have our very specific mandates, and our guys are full-on trying to collect the waste. So although the waste pickers are there, we often work parallel with them. But whereas there are other departments in the city that would necessarily link with those people in that space. So we have departments like social development and early childhood development, which work with street people that are homeless, so they have systems that they set up in place for street people, then we have departments like enterprise and investment, who are involved with SMEs and assisting people in the financial economic space, which our department has got absolutely minimal competencies on. I mean, I wouldn’t know how to tell someone how to become an entrepreneur. You know, that’s not my competency. My competency is waste, waste diversion and waste-related technical competencies’*

*(municipal official).*



### **Work to support waste pickers**

Some of these officials have undertaken projects with the explicit objective of supporting reclaimers and have even sought creative ways to support reclaimers in the absence of official projects. Research conducted when stakeholders were developing the Waste Picker Integration Guideline found that such officials have encountered many challenges including:

- not having a budget for work with waste pickers
- not having a key performance indicator (KPI) related to waste picker integration, which meant they did not have time to work on it

*‘So, you can see that waste picker integration is not the only thing that I do. And that is a real challenge. And it’s, it’s a massive task’*

*(municipal official)*



- having professional expertise in waste management, but not community engagement and other skills required for work on waste picker integration

*‘We want to integrate waste pickers into a type of a municipal waste diversion system, let’s just be honest, it is not the easiest thing. It’s probably one of the most challenging things to do. On paper and in theory, it might seem quite easy, but it isn’t’*

*(municipal official)*



- lack of guidance on how to implement integration in ways that are compliant with relevant legislation such as the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA)
- not receiving guidance, training or support required to work with waste pickers
- lack of support from elected representatives and senior management
- lack of clarity on how to integrate undocumented reclaimers from other countries

*‘One of our biggest challenges with waste pickers which has lengthened the negotiations or meetings has been the South African versus non-South African. 80% of people that are working here are foreign nationals. Now the biggest problem is that you cannot give certain things to South Africans and not give them to non-South Africans because they are working together.’*

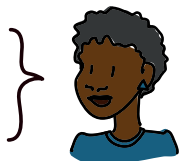
*(Municipal Official)*



- waste pickers objecting to municipal integration projects
- waste pickers refusing to be registered or participate in projects
- waste pickers withdrawing from projects
- waste pickers not being organized

*‘When I attend conferences, all I hear when people speak is how municipalities are not participating, but they never think about what leads to those circumstances.’*

*(municipal official)*



### **Recommendations from officials**

Based on their experiences, officials made a number of important proposals regarding

changes that are needed to facilitate municipal work on waste picker integration, including:

- adopt national guidelines and targets
- allocate dedicated funding to waste picker integration
- propose changes to by-laws and landfill licences to facilitate integration
- develop a more collaborative approach for working with reclaimers
- provide education for municipal officials, management, and elected representatives on waste pickers and waste picker integration
- learn about examples of different approaches to integration
- provide training for municipal officials and management to develop/deepen skills related to do integration work.

### **The need for education, training and accountability**

Stigmatization of waste pickers and discrimination against them is pervasive. As a result, even officials who support waste pickers may not see waste pickers as knowledgeable experts, may assume that officials should make decisions for waste pickers, and may work within a 'charity approach' to integration. This top-down approach is how most policies are developed and decisions are made in South African municipalities.

LINK TO: SECTION ON  
PARTNERSHIP VS CHARITY



**TIP**

When municipalities and other bodies work on waste picker integration, it is essential that they reach explicit agreement with waste pickers on what they all agree integration means. It can be helpful to discuss and agree on the answers to the following questions:

- Who/what is being integrated into what, why, how, when, by whom, and in whose interest?

Other officials have negative attitudes towards waste pickers and waste picker integration, seeing reclaimers as nuisances, criminals, and threats to effective municipal waste management and recycling. This approach is in line with how, until very recently, waste pickers have been framed in national legislation, policies and programmes and municipal plans, by-laws and programmes.

To date, most local governments and municipal waste management departments have not seen waste pickers as part of the waste management and recycling systems and have tried to prevent waste pickers from working. They have assumed that contracting private companies is the only and most effective way to implement separation at source programmes, which has displaced waste pickers and reduced their ability to earn an income, causing great hardship without meaningfully increasing diversion from landfills. Successful implementation of waste picker integration requires a fundamental paradigm shift.

LINK TO: SECTION ON S@S AND  
WASTE PICKER INTEGRATION



In addition, because the Waste Picker Integration Guideline and integration requirements in the 2020 National Waste Management Strategy (NWMS) are so new, most municipal officials, managers and elected representatives do not know about them.

*‘I don’t know that much about the waste pickers, because waste pickers have only been my focus ever since this year’*

*(municipal official)*



For all of these reasons, the recommendation that key role players in municipal governance and administration receive education and training on waste pickers and integration is included as a key component of the first of the Seven Steps for Waste Picker Integration, and the recommendation that integration become part of their KPIs is part of Step Five on institutionalizing integration.

LINK TO: STEP 1 FOR WASTE PICKER INTEGRATION



Waste pickers should participate in the design and conducting of education and training for municipal officials, managers and elected representatives so that they can provide meaningful insight into who waste pickers are, how they work, the challenges they face, their primary needs, the problems current municipal approaches create for them, and the best ways forward for integration. Having waste pickers as educators will also establish their knowledge and expertise and help to transform the ways municipal officials, managers and elected representatives see, understand them and engage them.

### References

Samson, M. 2020. Integrating reclaimers into our understanding of the recycling economy. CSIR Technical Report, March. Available at:

[https://wasteroadmap.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/1-Wits\\_Final\\_Report\\_Synthesis.pdf](https://wasteroadmap.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/1-Wits_Final_Report_Synthesis.pdf)



**Building Capacity for Waste Picker Integration**

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