Landfill sites in South African municipalities are governed by legislation. However, municipal officials have embarked on different strategies for engaging with waste pickers at landfill sites in their jurisdiction. Waste pickers on landfill sites are also organized in different ways including through cooperatives. Some of these are discussed below.
As far back as 2006, the Emfuleni local municipality began working with reclaimers at the Palm Springs Landfill. Some of the practices that were established are still very relevant today.

Emfuleni is in the Vaal Triangle and is part of the Sedibeng District Municipality in Gauteng Province. At that time, the Palm Springs landfill was not licenced and 650 reclaimers were working there. The municipality wanted to licence the landfill and get the reclaimers off the site. But when they hired Oupa Loate as the Superintendent for landfills in 2006, he came with a different approach.

Oupa noted that although the minimum requirements for landfills discourage reclaiming:

"You can have wastepickers if you have a good management system in place. Then you are entitled to have them... The minimum requirements say there should be no one on site and you can take that as is. But if you see that 90% of the waste being dumped here is recyclable then you can say there is something we can do - we can have people here, we can have a buyback centre and do something. Unlike his counterparts in other municipalities who dismissed the possibility of brokering agreements with reclaimers, Loate observed that, "[w]hen you start negotiating with people they are very intelligent. What you need to do is to talk to people and to convince the people".

Rather than simply tolerating the presence of reclaimers he saw it as his role to proactively support and encourage them. He emphasized that

"You must let them know the important role that they play in terms of the environment. You must make them feel better”.

Loate worked closely with reclaimer representatives. They decided that they would divide the community into four groups based on age and gender, with one group each for young women, young men, older women and older men. The young men were then split into two groups to separate the youngsters from more middle-aged men. Each group elected two reclaimers to be on a steering committee that met regularly with Loate.
The five groups had rotating rights to the trucks that enter the landfill. This reduced the scramble for materials that had been taking place and it ensured that young men couldn’t muscle out the women and the older men. It meant that everyone had a more equal chance of salvaging high value materials and similar quantities of materials. Each reclaimer was allocated a dedicated sorting space away from the tip face. This improved safety for the reclaimers, made the landfill more orderly, and ensured that each reclaimer could secure their ownership of the materials they collected.

Loate noted the importance of being present and active when developing projects with reclaimers. He advised that “You must be with them from day one until the success of the project. Establishing a committee and holding regular meetings with reclaimers is crucial.

Another key intervention at the landfill was that the reclaimers at Palm Springs were registered. The municipality arranged for the Department of Home Affairs to come and help South Africans apply for identity books. However, reclaimers did not need to have an ID in order to registered and all reclaimers were registered, including those from other countries.

Sixteen years later, new challenges have arisen, with a large influx of new reclaimers and an increase in young men who are nyaope addicts. Reclaimer representatives report that the municipality is less supportive and the landfill itself is not in a good condition. But the reclaimers still work in the five groups, and some are organizing to try to improve their conditions once again.
Cape Agulhas is a small municipality of around 40,000 people. It started a program called the Waste Pickers Project which is connected to the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP).

**Problem:**
The municipality was concerned about having the waste pickers on site as the landfill permit does not permit them to be at or work on the landfill.

**Short contracts:**
The municipality recruited waste pickers at the landfill site to work on waste collection in other areas of the municipality, including the informal settlement alongside the landfill site.

The municipality set up short-term contracts with waste pickers as part of an EPWP project. In terms of these contracts, waste pickers were responsible for cleaning up the landfill, for supervision and law enforcement, and also for fixing fences. Once a week, the waste pickers cleaned the informal settlement near the landfill. The contracts were 3-6 months in duration. The earnings were R120 per day. This included three days of cleaning and fixing at the landfill and one day in the informal area.

About 25 waste pickers were employed at a time on these contracts and there was a rotation system so that everyone had an opportunity to be part of the project.

**Challenges:**
- Funding and sustaining the project: Project sustainability was impacted by the availability of funding although EPWP funds were used.
- Working with many independent waste pickers: Waste pickers in Cape Agulhas are not organized, which made it more difficult for the municipality to engage with them and ensure their regular participation.
The Madibeng local municipality has two streams of waste waste pickers – waste pickers who work on landfill sites and street waste pickers. There are also waste picker working in rural villages. The municipality has one government-administered landfill site. The Municipality has an integrated waste management plan and the objective to minimize waste to the landfill site.

The municipality operates a transfer station which is used by waste pickers. People come to the transfer station and unload their waste. It is a storage and sorting space before material that cannot be recycled is taken to the landfill site.

**Buyers:**
Buyers come to the landfill site on a Wednesday or Friday to buy recyclables. They establish accounts with waste pickers, who are paid month end.

**Corporate assistance:**
The municipality runs a Waste and Environmental Forum. A local mining company in Madibeng arranged for PPE for waste pickers as part of their corporate social responsibility. There are around 75 people on the landfill.

**Different conditions for migrants:**
The municipality doesn’t include non-South Africans as part of their programmes. Access cards are not distributed to non-South Africans although non-South Africans are allowed on the landfill if they sign in.

**Conflicts:**
The municipality is trying to reduce conflict as there were multiple fights at the landfill.

**Services:**
The municipality is trying to address the issues of health and safety for the waste pickers. They are also trying to provide portable toilets as there are no facilities currently.

**Capacity building:**
The municipality provided training on the sorting of waste and waste characterization. Municipal officials and counsellors require more training and awareness around waste and waste pickers.

**Sustainability:**
The sustainability of the project is threatened by the lack of resources and the lack of financial support.
4. Robinson Deep Landfill in Johannesburg

When integration leads to dispossession

The Robinson Deep Landfill lies just south of Johannesburg’s central business district. It is more than one hundred years old and, like the three other functioning landfills owned by the City’s Pikitup waste management utility, it is just a few years away from being completely full.

It was the site of a City project that sought to integrate reclaimers into a separation at source programme. But ultimately the reclaimers chose to ‘dis-integrate’ themselves from the pilot and return to the landfill as the pilot made them worse off than before they started. Samson (2020) and Sekhwela and Samson (2020) unravel the puzzle of how an initiative to benefit reclaimers could have had the exact opposite effect.

Since at least 2008, Pikitup and the City had told reclaimers that the only way they could be integrated is to form cooperatives. In that year, they ran a workshop for reclaimers from Robinson Deep. Hoping to receive financial support and other benefits, the reclaimers formed five cooperatives.

The opportunity they had been waiting for finally came in 2013, when Pikitup and the City invited them to participate in a separation at source pilot project in which they would collect recyclables put out by residents in nearby suburbs. As only two cooperatives could be included, the five cooperatives merged into two so that everyone could benefit from the opportunity.

Pikitup and the City gave each participating reclamer personal protective equipment and provided each cooperative with the use of a truck with a driver who knew the collection routes. In addition, the cooperatives were given sorting space at a materials recovery facility (MRF) located at the landfill.

But there were a few crucial things that Pikitup and the City did not provide to the cooperatives. First, they did not pay the reclamer cooperatives for the collection service, even though they paid private companies for providing the same service. Second, they did not allow the reclaimers to sell the recyclables to the buyers of their choice. Instead, the reclaimers were required to sell their recyclables to the person running the MRF, who paid lower prices than other buyers in the city. Third, Pikitup and the City did not sign contracts or any other form of written agreement with the cooperatives. Fourth, the cooperatives were not given a date for when the pilot would end and implementation would begin.
The reclaimers’ problems were compounded by the fact that only 18% of residents separated their recyclables. In addition, the existing street reclaimers - who had not been considered when the pilot was created - often beat the cooperatives to the separated materials. The truck and driver were available for too few hours a day, which were not at the times that would be best to collect the materials. The reclaimers had only formed the cooperatives so that they could be integrated and dealing with internal cooperative politics took up a significant amount of their working time.

As a result, the reclaimers earned less money and lost autonomy over their work. It also took the preferential buyer longer to pay them than it had taken buyers they would have chosen to sell to. When they informed Pikitup and EISD of these challenges they were told that no changes could be made as it was a pilot project. But as the pilot did not have an end date, that meant none of the problems could ever be resolved.

At first reclaimers were willing to experience these hardships as they thought the pilot would improve and they did not want to lose the opportunity to be involved in separation at source. When it became clear that the situation would remain unchanged, the majority ‘dis-integrated’ themselves and went back to reclaiming at the landfill. Some kept a foot in the door by hiring casual workers to do the separation at source collection for them.

Although the street reclaimers reduced the quantity of recyclables that could be collected by the cooperatives, they were the ones who suffered most from the pilot. This was because they had always collected the recyclables in the area, and by excluding them, the project dispossessed the street reclaimers and reduced their incomes.

The Robinson Deep pilot project is an important case to understand. The City and Pikitup officials were keen to integrate reclaimers into separation at source, and the reclaimers were keen to be integrated. The primary reason that the project failed was because it was designed in a top-down way (or ‘charity approach’) in which all decisions were made by officials and professionals, and reclaimers were simply expected to participate. In the end, the options chosen by the City were not in the interests of reclaimers.

If both the street and landfill reclaimers had been part of discussions about what kind of integration projects to develop and what forms they should take, then it is far more likely that the projects would have benefited the reclaimers, increased integration, and improved the recycling rate. Reclaimers know their own needs. They also know how the actual recycling collections system in South Africa works far better than anyone else. Partnering with reclaimers not only complies with the key integration principle that reclaimers must be involved in all decisions that affect their work, but also ensures that integration and separation at source programmes are more likely to succeed.

References