Northern Landfill Site in Mangaung

Case study

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The Northern Landfill site in Mangaung is a large site where around 60 waste pickers work. About half of these waste pickers work in cooperatives. The organisation of cooperatives has assisted waste pickers in having a voice in negotiations with the municipality and facilitated their access to some opportunities. However, the cooperatives have also encountered problems. They have been exploited by at least one private contractor. Although they have good relationship with some municipal officials, the cooperatives feel that the municipality could do much more to provide them with adequate services, facilitate their access to equipment that would improve their working conditions and offer further income generating opportunities for them.

1 A large landfill in need of management
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. There is waste blowing around - even on this side of the weighbridge - on this sprawling site where the clearing, compacting and covering of waste is not nearly keeping up with fresh dumping. Indeed, if there is an organised logic to the activity of the bulldozing and compacting machinery that is sometimes active and often standing dormant (an official says several vehicles are out of diesel) then it is overshadowed by apparently random clearing of pathways for trucks and bakkies that arrive throughout the day to tip waste towards the rear of the site. There is little apparent supervision of the work.

The guidelines for sanitary landfilling in South Africa require at a minimum that waste must be compacted and covered at the end of each day’s operations. [http://sawic.environment.gov.za/documents/266.PDF](http://sawic.environment.gov.za/documents/266.PDF)

A glass-sided new site office overlooks the weighbridge and five municipal employees are in the office. They are tasked with manually recording, through estimation, the type and mass of materials that are being brought to site. The weighbridge is not working and they have not yet received the computer equipment necessary for digitised recording.
There are key moments for managing landfill sites

1. Coordinate
2. Collect
3. Compact
4. Cover

The guidelines for landfill sites demand that at a minimum the waste must be compacted and covered every day. This procedure provides the weight and bonding for the waste so that it doesn't blow away and cause more litter. It requires coordination, gathering, compacting the waste and covering...

2 Waste picker needs
Waste pickers who work at the landfill sometimes store their sorted materials that are awaiting collection in the storeroom near the office. SAWPA chairperson, Lefa Mononga, hopes the storeroom will soon be used to store a baling machine – if one is donated by the municipality or by PETCO. This would massively improve efficiency and the amount of materials that could be recycled. And it would improve waste pickers’ incomes.

3 Approach: Cooperatives
Of the 60-plus waste pickers who worked 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. Lefa Monongo, the chairperson of the South Africa Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA) says the rationale for working in a cooperative is that most opportunities from the state, NGOs, donors and corporates come to people who are organised in cooperatives. It is often a requirement for external support. In addition, the costs of selling and transportation can be reduced if people pool their materials.

The disadvantages include:
- People may work fewer hours because they feel secure that others in the cooperative will compensate if they don’t meet high targets. Motivating people to work as hard as they would if they were working alone can be a challenge.
- If there are disagreements amongst members of a cooperative, intervention is required. At times cooperatives may even split up.
Most opportunities from the state, NGOs, donors and corporates come to people who are organised in cooperatives. When we work together it’s easier to get state support and donations. We can also reduce transportation costs if we pool our material.

But people work harder when they work for themselves than when they work in a cooperative. I earn more working alone.

When we don’t have the same goals in the cooperative it breaks apart.

Whether we work as individuals or in cooperatives, we need to coordinate our efforts. And we need partnerships with the state and business. Municipalities need to work with us and understand our needs and the systems we use so that they can support our efforts and systems can be integrated.

At this landfill the municipality has not always provided sustainable support. For example, it has provided:
- PPE outfits, but we have no baling machine
- Land, but poor management and supervision
- Infrastructure but vehicles often have no diesel
- A weighbridge and office, but no good computers
- Work but no data base of reclaimers
- Education programmes on waste with communities, but no separation at source programmes where communities could practice the principles being taught.

The workers on the Northern Landfill site have found that working in smaller groups with like-minded people suits them best. Cooperative groups of 20 or less have worked better than large groups.

4 Failed partnerships
In 2021, the waste pickers of one of the cooperatives partnered with a private company to buy and transport their sorted materials. But the partnership failed when the company failed to pay the waste pickers for two months. In addition, the company was deducting money for expenses that the waste pickers had not expected to pay. These extra costs reduced the earnings considerably.

5 The workings of the landfill

At the face of 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. A group of women waste pickers pass around pink plastic bags and rush towards a bakkie that is loaded with large bags. The load is mostly sanitizer bottles, used but in perfect condition.

Vehicles standing around
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 his work in retail store to train as a driver of earth moving 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.’ These visible signs of inactivity are one example of inadequate municipal systems. The municipality has an educational programme around waste minimisation. There are personnel to educate and train people in communities and schools around waste separation. But the municipality does not have
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a separation at source programme. And so training is not bolstered by action and the City is not demonstrating an active commitment to minimising waste.

There are lost opportunities – the City could work with waste pickers to develop training material and could partner with waste pickers so that they teach residents and children about the value of waste and waste separation.

**Buyers**
The reclaiming task at the landfill site starts with pulling waste from the dump trucks and the bakkies that are off-loading. Waste pickers fill their bags and take these to areas around the main face of the landfill site. There they separate out the different types of material, crush or squash it, and place it in separate large bags. They also wash the materials. This is the condition in which buyers will collect the material and transport it to buy back centres. ‘Buyers come every day,’ says Francelina of the trucks that arrive to collect the sorted and washed 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.

Lefa lives in Botshabelo. He catches a bus and taxi to work each day. His weekly bus fare is R350 and his daily taxi fares amount to R24.

**7 Key needs**
Waste pickers at the landfill site have been given PPE by several groups including the municipality and UNIDO. But this is not their major need anymore. They need equipment for baling and compacting and need transport to move waste to buy back centres, and to collect waste.

The municipality has not provided equipment or assistance for cooperatives to function more effectively. The municipality does not have a database of waste pickers on the site.

For a brief period in 2021, the cooperatives had an arrangement to collect materials from one mall, but it was informal and came to an end when the manager they reached the agreement with moved on from his job. Lefa wishes the cooperatives could have contracts with malls so that they could have more secure access to the abundance of recyclables discarded by stores.

And he hopes for a transfer centre where clean waste could be deposited for waste pickers to sort and sell, much like the Vaalpark recycling centre, a SAWPA pilot project in Metsimaholo.

He would like to have more waste pickers participate in Environmental Justice School programmes like those he attended run by groundwork, and he would like waste pickers to educatescholars and youth about waste.
8 Learning points

- Cooperatives struggle to survive when they are too large – it is better to work in smaller groups and for people to choose whom to partner with.
- Cooperative members must find ways to ensure that everyone puts in an equal effort.
- Various organisations and state units are handing out PPE, but there is insufficient equipment to assist waste pickers to deepen their role in the waste supply chain.
- There are lost opportunities – the City could work with waste pickers to develop training material and could partner with waste pickers so that they teach residents and children about the value of waste and waste separation.
- Agreements for cooperatives to collect materials from businesses and shopping malls should be formalised so that access does not depend on particular individuals.
- The City could play a more active role in assisting waste pickers to secure such contracts.

Reference