

# Separation at Source by a Waste Picker Cooperative



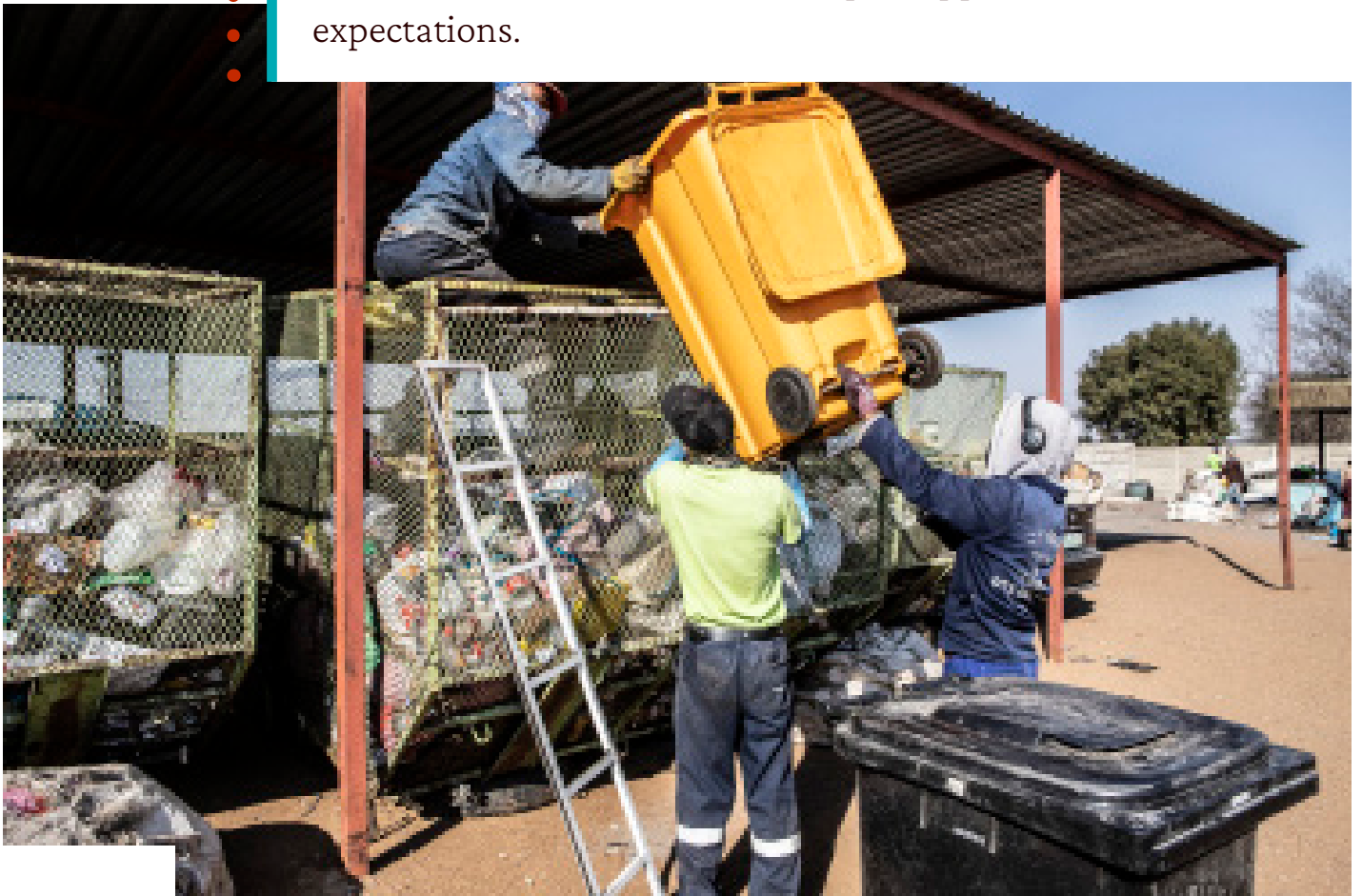
## Case Study of Metsimaholo

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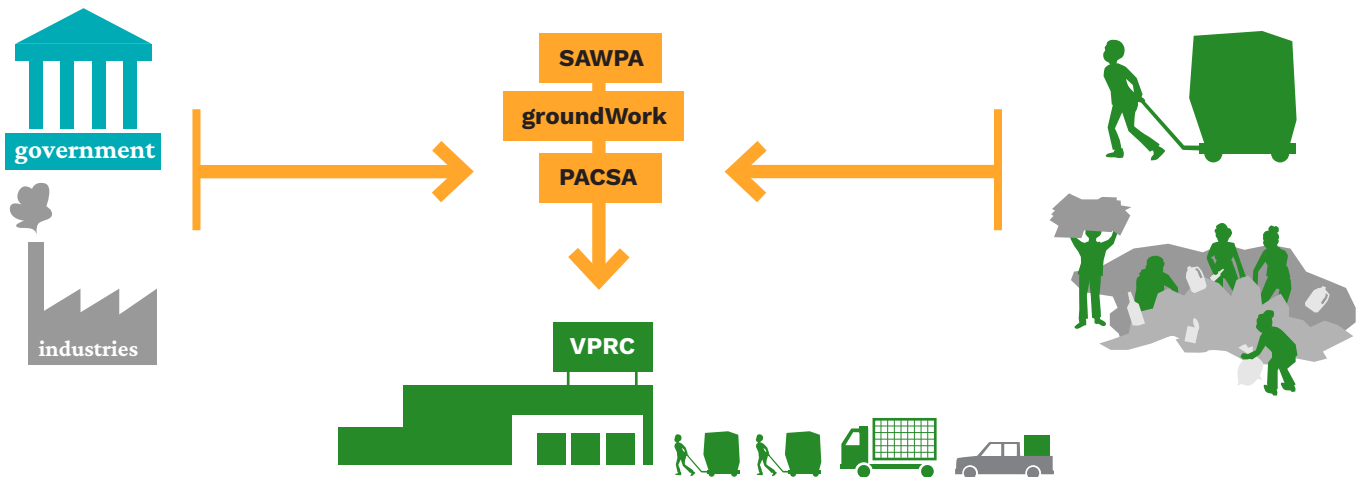
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- This project details a cooperative approach to waste picking.
- It has involved the establishment of cooperatives and the
- development of a system of picking that focuses on a recycling
- facility where pickers sort clean waste. The project has involved
- picker cooperatives, NGO support, the municipality and industry
- associations. The extent of municipal support has fallen short of
- expectations.



# Vaalpark Recycling Centre



## 1. Organising for cooperative working approaches

The South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA) was established in 2009 with support from the environmental justice nongovernmental organisation (NGO) groundWork. SAWPA was formed to unite waste pickers to respond to hostile municipalities and to push for pro-waste picker legislation. Increasingly, municipalities were denying waste pickers access to landfill sites. groundWork advocated that waste pickers work together in established cooperatives in order to access funding as well as to advocate for waste picker rights. <https://globalrec.org/2014/06/26/four-key-pilot-projects-operating-under-sawpa/>

Waste pickers in Metsimaholo work in three areas: at the landfill site, on the streets and at the Vaal Park Recycling Centre (VPRC). A key model operating in this municipal area is waste picker cooperatives.

## 2. NGO support

After the formation of SAWPA, groundWork worked with waste pickers to build two cooperatives at the landfill in Metsimaholo and assisted the pickers to sell in bulk for improved prices. Over time, however, the original cooperatives collapsed due to internal conflicts. groundWork continued to support and work with SAWPA and the Vaal Park project in Sasolburg was initiated. This project was a partnership between SAWPA and the Packing Council of South Africa (now known as Packaging SA). It is led by the Ikageng-Ditamating (ID) cooperative, which is made up of waste pickers who previously worked at the landfill.

## 3. Private sector project support

Industry and SAWPA agreed to establish an integration pilot project in Metsimaholo after they went on a joint trip in 2011 to explore how waste pickers were integrated in Brazil. At that time, PACSA was developing a draft Industry Waste Management Plan, and the project was included in the plan as an official pilot.

The project has two main components. First, the ID cooperative provides a separation at source collection service to residents in the upmarket neighbourhood of Vaal Park. Second, the cooperative established the Vaal

Park Recycling Centre (VPRC), a space where they can sort the materials collected and prepare them for sale, and where residents can drop-off recyclables.

Industry associations and government donated infrastructure and equipment to the cooperative. This included: land allocated for recycling, trucks, trolleys and bins provided for the waste collection. The Vaal Park project entailed the provision of wheelie bins for recyclables to 3000 households so that they could separate the recyclables from waste.

## 4. Municipal role and limitations

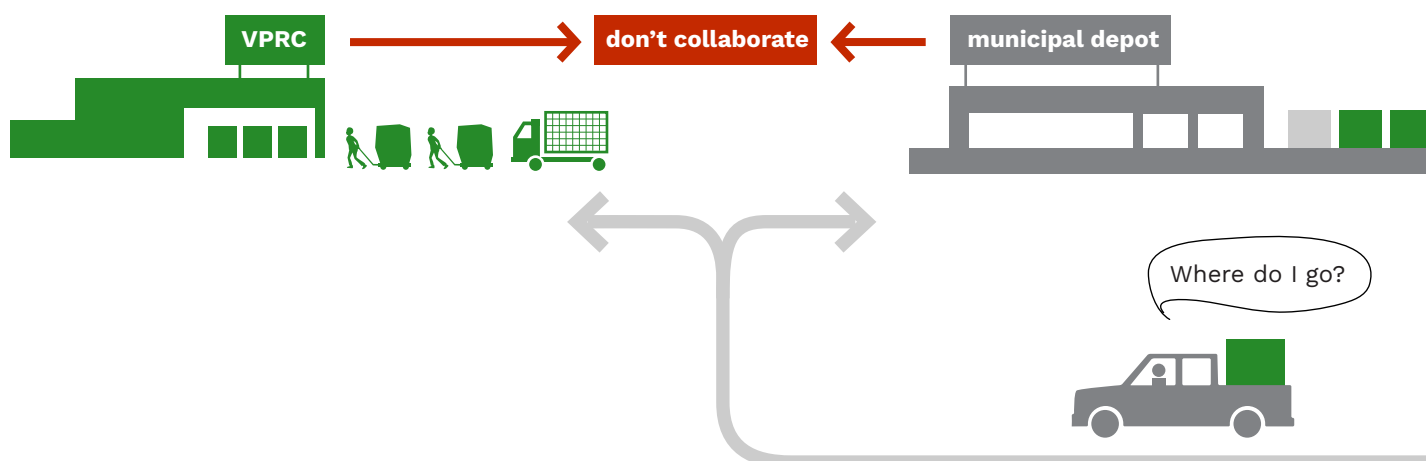
The waste picker integration pilot was not formally adopted by the Metsimaholo municipality, although there were references to waste pickers in some of the Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and in the Integrated Waste Management Plan (2014). Later IDPs such as the 2016/2017 IDP mention waste management as a focal point, but do not mention waste pickers specifically. Furthermore, there were no key performance indicators (KPIs) for municipal staff associated with waste picker integration. As a result, the municipality did not allocate a budget to work with waste pickers and there were no municipal officials charged with working with waste pickers to support the integration process.

Despite this, municipal officials and the state have been involved in the VPRC and work with waste pickers. The research report on the VPRC on which this case study is based notes that 'although waste management officials had neither the mandate to pursue waste picker integration nor official guidance on how to relate to waste pickers, they engaged waste pickers on a regular basis due to waste pickers' intimate, if informal role in the waste management system' (Samson, 2020: 8). As they worked without a budget, guidance, support, or training, they faced many challenges, and as this was not in their KPIs it took time away from the work on which they were evaluated. In terms of state support, the municipality provided land for the VPRC, although no formal structures were allowed to be built on the site. The province also provided funding and shipping containers which served as an office and storage facility. The district municipality provided an electric baler and roof. Unfortunately, for many years it was not possible for the cooperative to use the baler, as

there was no electricity on site. Eventually, through donor money raised by SAWPA and groundWork, a solar electricity system was installed which made it possible to using the baling machine.

Although the partners provided some funding and equipment for the VPRC, the waste pickers were not paid for the service they provided, and the cooperative needed to fund the ongoing operations solely through the sale of recyclables. This created many challenges for the cooperative and the individual waste pickers. Because the waste pickers ultimately

earned less than they had at the landfill, six of the members returned to the landfill. Due to the lack of sufficient funds, the remaining members rely on casual workers to assist with sorting and cleaning materials, making the cooperative dependent on the exploitation of other precarious workers, rather than being able to function as a fully democratic and egalitarian worker cooperative.



## 5. Vaal Park Project Results

After three years, the programme had achieved some successes, including the fact that two thirds of households in Vaal Park recycle and participate in the S@S programme. The ID cooperative also generated extra income by selling recyclables that are dropped off by community members and through the provision of collection services to private businesses <sup>2</sup>.

The significance of the Vaal Park pilot is that it represents the first time in South Africa that a waste picker integration project had been undertaken as a partnership between waste pickers, government and private industry. The pilot has grappled with some challenges which Samson et al attribute primarily to the informal nature of the project. The lack of contracts and agreements between the parties meant each party had different expectations of the project, existing unequal power relations between waste pickers and other parties were not addressed, and there was no agreement around the conflict resolution process, for example. The reliance of the project on free labour of black reclaimers to provide the collection service perpetuated colonial and apartheid exploitation of black workers, and waste pickers' ironic and unacceptable ongoing subsidization of industry and the municipal waste management department. Another shortcoming was that street waste pickers, not part of the project, were aggrieved by their recyclables being taken by the ID cooperative.

## 6. Lessons Learnt

### Formal, official processes are required to integrate waste pickers:

The industry organisations and municipality put contracts and formal agreements in place when they work with other partners and contractors, but these were not in place for the VPRC programme. Industry and municipalities cannot take an informal, ad hoc approach to integration. Projects must be properly planned, agreements/contracts signed, and sufficient resources be put in place.

**Working with residents:** Simon Mbata, the SAWPA Chairperson and later Coordinator, said it took the cooperative members three years to secure the site for the VPRC and develop the project. It is a separation at source model in the suburb of Vaal Park. This is an affluent suburb with high value waste. He says, "We have a WhatsApp Group to talk with the Vaal Park community, to provide updates and information. Many people have been bringing their bins and recyclables here to empty. But we still collect once a week."

**Maintaining equipment:** When machinery and equipment are donated, there should also be resources to maintain them. When Simon was interviewed in 2021, he reported that "The truck has been broken for 3 weeks and we hope it will be repaired soon".

**Municipality not fulfilling its commitment:** While the site is stable it is not as successful as it could be. This is partly because the municipality has not fulfilled its commitment to link the site with the adjacent municipal depot. Because this has not been done, people either get confused or do not bother to drop material off at both sites. This means that recyclables are often dropped off with organic waste at the municipal site and officials do not often bring those materials to the cooperative. In effect this means a competitive rather than cooperative arrangement exists.



# To question & discuss

## 7. Questions

- What is the likelihood of the long term sustainability of an integration project if it is not reflected in municipal policy?
- What KPIs should municipal officials have to ensure that they have the budget and time to work with waste pickers?
- What role can intermediaries play in supporting waste picker integration programmes?
- What should the obligations be of the private sector in supporting waste diversion?

## 8. Discussion

- What are the benefits and complexities of working with multiple partners in waste picker integration projects?
- What resources should municipalities contribute towards supporting waste pickers?
- How should partnerships with waste picker organisations and cooperatives be formalized?



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Samson, M. et al. 2020. Final Technical Report: Metsimaholo Case Study. Lessons from Waste Picker Integration Initiatives: Development of Evidence Based Guidelines to Integrate Waste Pickers into South African Municipal Waste Management Systems. CSIR Briefing Note, January 20, 2020. Available at: [https://wasteroadmap.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/1-Wits\\_Final\\_Report\\_Metsimaholo-Technical-Report.pdf](https://wasteroadmap.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/1-Wits_Final_Report_Metsimaholo-Technical-Report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Samson, M. et al. 2020. Final Technical Report: Metsimaholo Case Study. Lessons from Waste Picker Integration Initiatives: Development of Evidence Based Guidelines to Integrate Waste Pickers into South African Municipal Waste Management Systems. CSIR Briefing Note, January 20, 2020. Available at: [https://wasteroadmap.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/1-Wits\\_Final\\_Report\\_Metsimaholo-Technical-Report.pdf](https://wasteroadmap.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/1-Wits_Final_Report_Metsimaholo-Technical-Report.pdf)

