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South Africa's City Surfers Ride Again

Waste pickers, recycling reclaimers, trolley men, city surfers... however South Africans know them, they're a familiar sight on suburban streets, even during the country's lockdown.

What is a recycling reclaimer? These men and women are self-employed in the South Africa's large informal sector. With a large flatbed trolley on wheels, they go from rubbish bin to rubbish bin on a suburb's given waste collection days. With no formal training and no protective equipment, they salvage, sort, clean and transport loads of recyclables weighing up to 200kg. They do this on foot, crossing up to 25km a day.

Recycling reclaimers have to date never been included in municipal planning documents, though a pilot study conducted shortly before lockdown extrapolates that they reduce Pikitup's collections by 5,866 tonnes every week in Johannesburg alone, and save municipalities about R750 million in landfill airspace... every year.

In effect, waste pickers subsidize South Africa's entire recycling industry. The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research reports that they collect between 80 and 90% of the country's used packaging and paper. However, their marginalization means they receive a small fraction of the sale price for these recyclables.

The African Reclaimers Organization (ARO), part of the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers, has worked with university researchers to study how individuals with the expertise and entrepreneurial energy to step in where citizens fail to separate at source, and where municipalities neglect to play their part, are stigmatised, harassed, and sometimes criminalized.

Lockdown has been no different.

Putting themselves at risk every day, ARO has long been asking for access to protective equipment and sanitising material since long before lockdown. Since 1 May 2020, they've been allowed to return to work on Johannesburg's streets, but they're more at risk now than ever before. In addition, many of their usual point of sale sites remain closed across the country.

As some of the most vulnerable workers in society, *Daily Maverick* and *GroundUp* have reported how the lockdown has meant starvation for those who stop working. For those lucky enough to receive a food package, it means little when they know their families living far away and reliant on their income, will go hungry.

Lawyers for Human Rights brought an urgent court application for recycling reclaimers to be deemed essential workers, as they form part of the waste management services that become even more critical during a health crisis. The application failed, and was met unsympathetically by South Africa's Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who called them "opportunistic".

But what can you do to help? ARO shared some advice on their Facebook page:

- Keep separated recyclables apart for a few days before putting them out for collection. This reduces the risk of infection for those handling it after you.
- High risk sanitary waste such as dirty tissues that cannot be flushed away, should be sealed in clear bags or marked so waste pickers know not to touch them.*
- Keep organic, dry and sanitary waste in separate bags for handling..
- Donate gloves, soap and hand sanitizers where possible. Leave out buckets of water with soap for reclaimers to access. This will help keep them safe.
- There's a BackaBuddy campaign for "African Reclaimers Organisation Solidarity" if you'd like to give:

<https://www.backabuddy.co.za/champion/project/aro-solidarity>

References

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