

Power to the waste pickers

*Pickers gather recyclable materials from rubbish discarded by others. It is a difficult and risky job but an important one. Yet they also suffer discrimination, writes **Kamcilla Pillay***

THE Department of Environmental Affairs recently handed over 15 trolleys to several waste pickers of Bruntville, in Mooi River.

These people, the department said, had in the past converted retail store trolleys into convenient modes of transport to move the collected waste material to a buy-back centre with ease.

Environmental Affairs Deputy Minister Barbara Thomson said at the event that recycling had enormous economic potential.

“Conservative estimates put the financial value of the formal South African waste sector at R15 billion.

“It is time that we wake up to this economic potential of recycling.”

According to the last study conducted on waste generation in South Africa in 2011, they said, South Africans generated about 108 million tons of waste.

This, said the department, was roughly equivalent to the combined weight of 10 million double-decker buses.

“More worrying is the fact that 98 million tons of waste was disposed of at landfill sites. This means that only 10% of all waste generated in South Africa in 2011 was recycled.

“Given the high costs of building new landfill sites and the scarcity of available land for landfill sites close to urban areas, it is clear that we need to focus more and more on alternative waste disposal mechanisms such as recycling.”

According to a study by the international activist organisation Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising, 65%



Waste collector Nomcebo Mkhize will be one of the Bruntville community members benefiting from the trolleys.

of their study sample, earnings from waste picking were the main source of household income and only about one quarter had any other income.

Victor Mchunu, 56, who has lived in Bruntville all his life, said there was stigma associated with being a waste picker.

“But it’s important to forget about that, and about what people say and think. This is a way to end your poverty.”

Mchunu has been collecting waste from the townspeople and landfills since 2005.

He supports several family members – including three grandchildren and one grandchild – from his earnings

“Because of this (job) they can go to school and we all have enough food to eat.”

The trolleys, he said, would go a long way to helping them do their jobs.

“We normally carry the waste (which consists of paper, plastic and glass), we gather or carry it on our heads. This makes it easier.”

Through the Mooi River Recycling Co-operative, he earns around R1 500 a month, or R80 a day.

Another waste picker, Albert Mahlaba, 50, said the trolleys would also make it easier to do his job.

He has been collecting waste and contributing to the project for two years.

The workers, like Mahlaba and



A delegation from the Department of Environmental Affairs got their hands dirty by joining waste pickers in Bruntville, Mooi River. The waste pickers received 15 trolleys for waste collection. PICTURES: LEON LESTRADE

Mchunu, who contribute to the local co-operative – run in part by Sibusiso Dladla – begin their days at 8am and finish at 4pm.

Dladla, 34, who lives in Bruntville and helps run a waste management co-operative, said the trolleys would be a “huge help” to those who collected rubbish.

“We buy waste from the people. The trolleys will help the workers to move more waste.”

Workers, he said, collected paper, cardboard, plastics and glass, and

the co-op bought up to eight tons of waste a week.

Environmental and social justice organisation groundWork said on its website recently that of the 1 327 waste dumps that were documented in South Africa, more than 639 general waste landfills and 58 highly hazardous landfill sites were unlicensed.

“(We have) been working with waste pickers since 2010. (They) have been referred to negatively as scavengers in society and therefore,

there has been a push by the South African Waste Pickers’ Association for government’s recognition of their work as an important part of the local economy.”

The Council for Science and Industrial Research (CSIR) were last year investigating ways in which informal waste pickers could be integrated into the South African waste and recycling economy, particularly when a mandatory Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is implemented for certain

waste streams.

“The intention with the planned implementation of EPR in South Africa is to move away from separate service and value chains towards a more integrated service-value chain that will result in increased recovery of recyclables,” said Prof Linda Godfrey, lead CSIR researcher on the study.

The informal sector, she said, was active in recovering valuable post-consumer recyclables from South Africa’s service-chain, having saved the country as much as R750 million in landfill airspace in 2014.

“This saving was at little to no cost to municipalities,” said Godfrey.

Godfrey emphasised that the existing active, but marginalised, informal sector needed to be taken into consideration when implementing EPR schemes.

“Implementing an EPR has the potential to compromise the livelihoods of an estimated 60 000 to 90 000 pickers if they are ignored in the design of the EPR schemes.

“Furthermore, exclusion can result in later conflict between the informal and formal sectors and possible ‘sabotage’ of formal collection and sorting systems.”

She said the informal sector was utilised in its current format, as a largely marginalised and unregulated community, recovering value at little to no cost to the value chain.

This sector, she said, was integrated into recycling programmes, with some level of regulation and monitoring, as well as with increased support from business and industry.