

■ WASTE PICKERS

Their home is a dump site



Hundreds of men, women and children eat, sleep and scavenge on this KZN landfill

THAMI MAGUBANE and KAILENE PILLAY

POVERTY and unemployment in Pietermaritzburg has led to a dramatic increase in the number of locals and foreigners who have made the Msunduzi Municipality's dump site their home.

The New England Road landfill site has hundreds of people – including infants and children – living in makeshift plastic shelters on the site.

They spend their days scavenging for food, and looking for cardboard and other material to sell. According to the waste pickers, they chose to live on or near the landfill because of exorbitant transport costs. The number of people living on or near the site had increased year on year, said groundWork's waste campaign manager Musa Chamane.

About 3 000 people work at the landfill site, while hundreds live on it.

Chamane said groundWork had spoken to the municipality about the dangers waste pickers were exposed to.

"The best way of managing waste is to have a Materials Recovery Facility, where waste pickers work to recover and sort recyclable materials, rather than them working on the dump site," he said.

Chamane said that in 2007 when groundWork started, there were about 120 people living along the river, next to the dump, but the numbers had increased over the years.

"At the beginning, in 2007, there

DEATH ON THE JOB

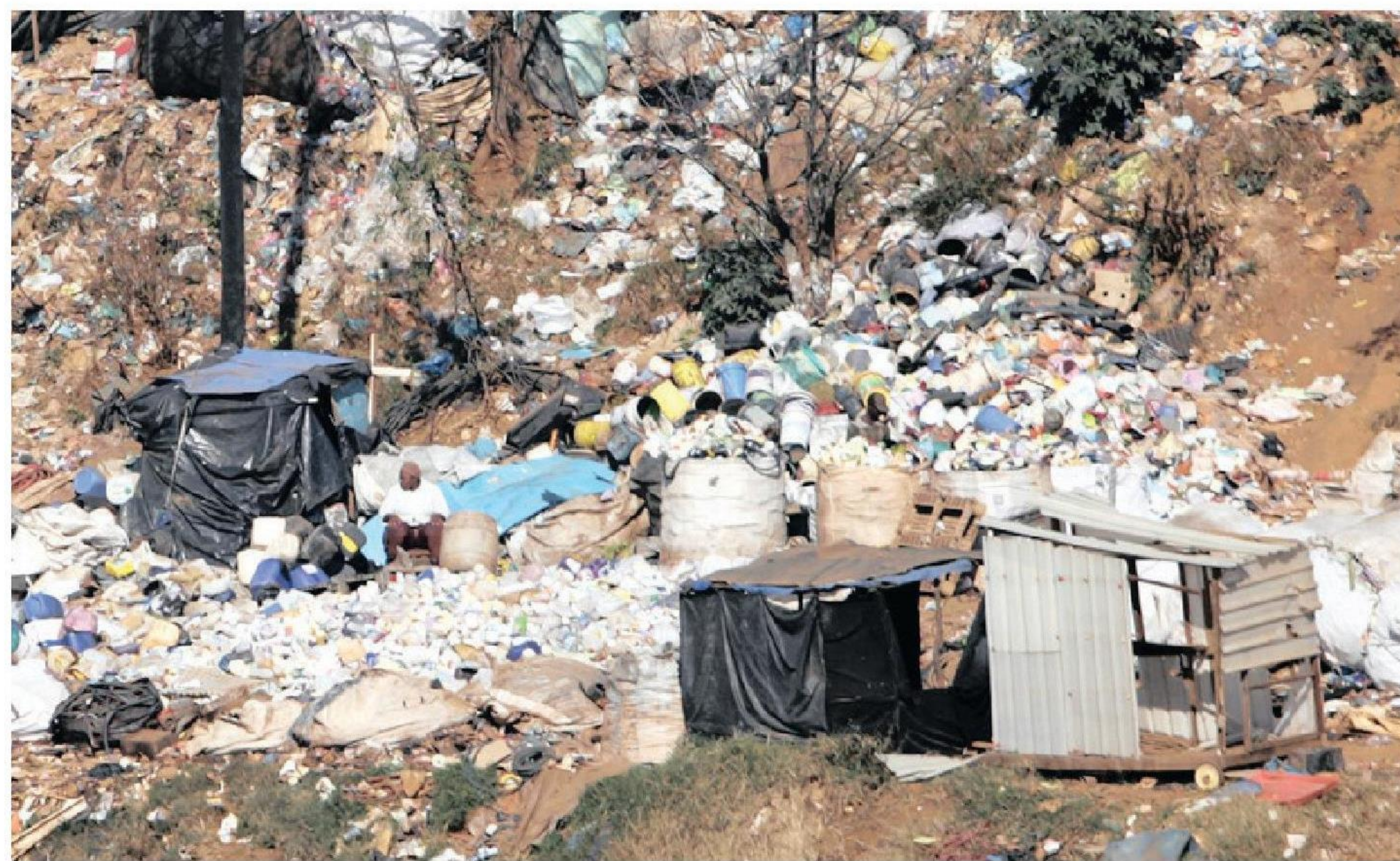
AT LEAST five waste pickers have died at the Pietermaritzburg landfill site since 2007.

- ◆ Earlier this year, Samkelo Hloaisi, 28, was shot dead, allegedly by a private security guard in a dispute over R50. The guard was arrested.
- ◆ Last year, waste picker Ntsiki Mhlakwane was killed when a municipal waste compactor crushed her.
- ◆ Also last year, a waste picker was left paralysed after she was hit by a dump truck on the site.
- ◆ In 2012, after heavy rains, waste picker Bongekile Hilda Ntshangase, 50, drowned in the Msunduzi River while she was making her way back to the landfill. | KAILENE PILLAY

were mainly South Africans living there. Now there are more foreign nationals, mainly from Lesotho, living near the dump. They are a divided community, constantly fighting because of language and tribalism," he said.

He said the competition among those who lived there and collected waste was also fierce.

Chamane said there were also locals who chose to live on or near the dump, as their homes were too far from the city centre, adding that pleas for them to move had fallen on deaf ears.



EVERY day, thousands scavenge at the New England landfill site in Pietermaritzburg, with some even choosing to live on the dump. | BONGANI MBATHA African News Agency (ANA)

Ward councillor Sandile Dlamini described the situation as "desperate".

"I have lost count of how many times I have reported the problem and no one is addressing the issue.

"I estimate that there must be 1 000 people there daily. Only about 200 of those go home each night. About 800 remain overnight on the dump or very close to it," said Dlamini.

The Mercury visited the site recently and found several small, makeshift shel-

ters, in which people were living.

There were also shacks that stood much taller, made of wood and plastic.

Just outside the landfill site, others have built shacks on the banks of the Msunduzi River that runs through the area. Young men were seen sitting near the entrance to the site, waiting for the trucks that off-load waste.

They jump up on to the trucks as they drive in, without waiting for them to stop, and start searching for "valua-

bles". It's a dangerous scramble, as they often get injured during the stampede.

"I am one of the hundreds of people that live here," said a man, who declined to be named. He said he was originally from the Swayimane (Wartburg) area and moved to the site more than a year ago.

"I collect waste, but I did not have the R22 needed to travel daily, so I decided to stay here and only go back home when I have made enough money.

"Many people are also facing the same situation and have either moved into the landfill or are building shacks just outside the dump.

"There are small children. I've seen some in school uniforms and infants in their mother's arms. There is everything inside, there is even a tavern," he said. Another man, dressed in clean clothes, said he lived in Imbali township, outside Pietermaritzburg and only came to the landfill when he has transport money.

"I only come here to look for things to sell and for food that has been thrown away so I can feed my children," he said.

A community member from Sobantu township said they were concerned about the situation, especially about the people who choose to build their shacks at the banks of the Msunduzi River.

"They are likely to be washed away if the river gets flooded.

"Another problem is the drinking and fights. Regularly, we see police vehicles rushing over there."

MUNICIPALITY RESPONDS

THE Msunduzi Municipality is reluctant to evict hundreds of people – most of them foreign nationals – living on its landfill site, in New England Road, for fear of being accused of xenophobia..

The municipality's head of community services, Boniwe Zulu, said: "Many are foreign nationals. We are looking for ways to remove them without being accused of xenophobia.

"We have a detailed security plan for the landfill site, but we are having trouble implementing it because of financial constraints. At this point we have the bare minimum security."

This was evident when The Mercury visited the site two weeks ago. There were two security guards at the entrance and two inside the landfill. The Mercury understands that there are meant to be about 10 guards.

There was no screening, record-keeping or security measures.

Zulu said access to the landfill should be controlled, and those coming in and out should have identification.

Zulu said the municipality was working with national government to address the issue. The municipality, said Zulu, was worried about the people's presence, as it exposed the municipality to legal liability.

She added that they had recently advertised for a public and private partnership, for the development of the Waste Energy Plan, that could help limit the amount of waste sent to the landfill.

| THAMI MAGUBANE