

Your recycling isn't being recycled

Despite national plans to reuse waste and reduce SA's carbon emissions, too much rubbish is still going into landfills and money is being lost

Sipho Kings

Sunday mornings are frantic at Pikitup depots in Johannesburg. Filled by the previous day's chopping, mowing and decluttering, queues of bakkies and cars wait to be sent to the right waste stream. Each skip has a label, from building waste to lawn clippings and e-waste. When full, each skip should head off to a different place for processing.

General waste — the stuff that 66% of households nationally have collected from a black bin each week — goes to the landfill sites that are fast becoming the mountains of cities and towns. In Johannesburg, these are replacing mine dumps as the veritable blot on the horizon.

Other waste should be going to recycling. Because garden rubbish makes up 60% of the waste going to dumps, removing it from what will be sent to landfill sites is a big deal.

This is especially important in Gauteng because no new permits for landfills have been granted in two decades, and the environmental affairs department says landfills in South Africa's big cities will be full in five years.

Johannesburg Pikitup advertises that the waste collected from its 42 garden refuse sites, and put in "containers for organic matter", is then "transferred to a disposal site or taken to one of our composting sites".

But this doesn't seem to be happening. The *Mail & Guardian* has repeatedly visited five garden refuse sites in the city on different occasions, and found that waste is often not being



Flight of fancy: You may think you are doing your bit to recycle waste, but a lot of it is still going into landfills. Photo: Gulshan Khan/AFP

sorted. Under the direction of officials at the sites — tasked with directing waste streams to the right skips — building rubble, ceramic sinks and wood is thrown into the same skip as garden waste and taken away to landfills by refuse removal trucks.

And this is in the country's most well-resourced metro.

Recycling that waste isn't a legal requirement yet, but it is a stated objective at all levels of government. With landfill sites also generating 4% of our carbon emissions — in the form of methane gas from things like garden waste decomposing — fixing this is also a stated goal in the country's plans to reduce emissions.

In its annual State of Waste report, the environmental department says the country produces 54-million tonnes of general waste. Just under 40% of this is recycled, mostly in plastic

and glass recycling done by private companies. Of the 67-million tonnes of hazardous waste (mostly made up of ash from Eskom's coal-fired power plants), only 6% is recycled.

The country uses 1.8-million tonnes of plastic each year, but only 16% of that comes from recycled material. Of the plastic that is thrown away, 56% isn't recycled. About 630 000 tonnes is dumped illegally, with the potential of being washed into the ocean.

The report notes that this means South Africa is "ranked 11th in the world in terms of mismanagement of plastic waste".

In its research, social justice group Groundwork found that nearly half of the more than 1300 waste dumps in the country are not licensed. In its 2017 annual report on compliance with environment law, the environmental department's Green Scorpions said they had

inspected 75 waste management facilities. Only one in three was more than 50% compliant with the law. Problems included not sorting waste properly, so everything goes to landfills, and not lining landfill sites properly, so polluted water leaks into groundwater.

The compliance report warns that: "While there is an urgent need to address the licensing status of waste management facilities in South Africa, there is also a need to ensure that the conditions of the waste management licences are enforced."

Besides the pollution, not using waste means throwing money away. Twenty-five billion rands worth of resources are thrown into landfills each year, according to data from the natural resources and environment unit at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR).

Jobs are also lost: although throwing waste into a landfill creates one job per tonne of waste, recycling waste creates 13 jobs per tonne.

Cleaning up illegal waste adds more costs to municipalities, which are also foregoing the income they could generate from recycling.

The CSIR's data show that Cape Town spends R200-million a year cleaning up illegal waste; double the amount spent in Johannesburg.

With landfill sites projected to be full before 2025, diverting waste away from them has become a priority for metros. Pikitup is trialling separation at source, so that people put recyclable goods in see-through bags that are then collected separately from general waste. This is mandatory in selected neighbourhoods.

Recycling is one of South Africa's stated objectives in tackling climate change. But two of the government's biggest recycling initiatives — Buyisa-e-bag (for plastic bags) and Redisa (for tyres) — collapsed after mismanagement and allegations of fraud.

With this failure — and the mixing of waste at the municipal level — landfill sites will continue to grow, along with pollution and carbon emissions.