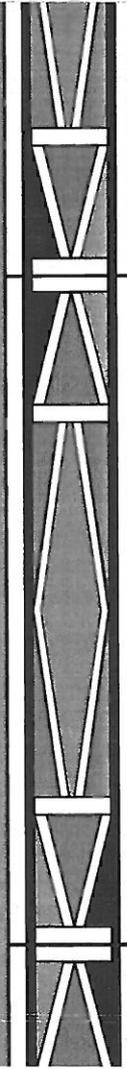


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**LIVING ON WHAT OTHERS THROW AWAY:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE SOCIOECONOMIC
CIRCUMSTANCES OF PEOPLE COLLECTING AND
SELLING RECYCLABLE WASTE**

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ABSTRACT

Street waste pickers are becoming a common sight on the streets of South Africa's cities and suburbs. Little research has been done on this social phenomenon. The aim of this article is to explore some of the socioeconomic circumstances of the people who collect recyclable waste in South Africa's cities. The research identifies the pivotal role played by the waste pickers in the waste management system even if they are unaware of it. Being a waste picker offers unskilled, unemployed people the opportunity to enter the informal economy in order to earn or augment their income. The social service professional can play a supportive role at different levels such as psychosocial support and at policy level. Several areas of further research are identified.

Key words: recycling, informal sector, reclaimers

INTRODUCTION

‘If we were any poorer, we’d be dead’ was a comment made by a waste picker in Colombia (Ballive, 2008:1). For many individuals and families in Africa, collecting and selling recyclable waste has become a way of survival and of generating an income, and it prevents many people from starving (Medina, 2007). The World Bank estimates that 1% of the world’s urban population survives through collecting and selling recyclable waste (Medina, 2007), while Langenhoven and Dyssel (2007) indicate that 37 000 people in South Africa are living off collecting recyclable waste.

People who collect and sell recyclable waste are referred to as waste pickers, scavengers, waste recyclers, garbage pickers or, more positively, as waste salvagers and reclaimers (Chvatal, 2010, Samson, 2010). The question of terminology is not simply of academic interest since terminology reflects and shapes attitudes and perceptions (Samson, 2010). The researchers prefer the most commonly used term ‘waste pickers’ as it describes exactly the person’s actions.

MOTIVATION FOR THE RESEARCH

The main issue in the existing literature refers to the waste pickers’ socioeconomic circumstances, within the bigger context of an ongoing debate about the relationship between informal waste pickers and formal waste management systems and the lack of policy and interest from the formal waste system to accommodate the waste pickers (Chvatal, 2010; Samson, 2010; Webster 2010; Langenhoven and Dyssel 2007; McLean, 2000). The interaction between the formal and informal role players is complex. Webster (2010) explains that the formal and informal waste systems are also part of two separate economies but are interconnected. The interconnectedness can be described and illustrated on page 136:

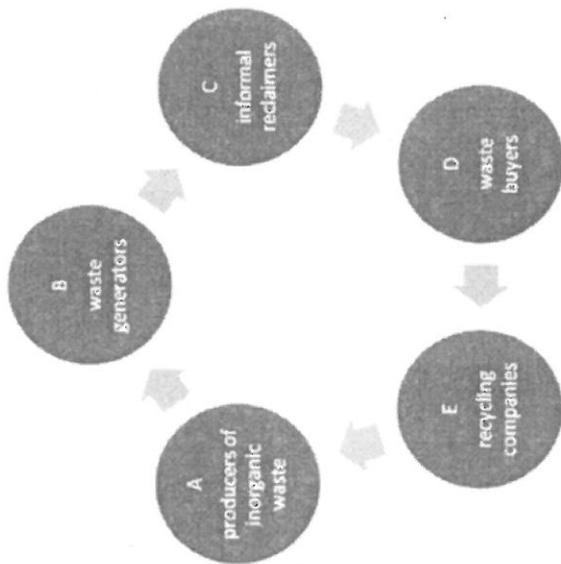


Figure 1: An illustration of the waste cycle

Waste pickers can only make a living if there are waste producers (A), for example, producers of plastic bottles and waste generators, or users (B), those who buy soft drinks in plastic bottles. According to Medina (2007), the amount and characteristics of waste generated in developed and developing countries differ markedly. Industrialised cities typically have higher waste generation rates than those in developing countries. The quantity of waste generated tends to go up as income increases. The average US resident produces over 1.5kg of waste per day, while a person in Cotonou Benin (Africa) only produces a 125g of waste. Therefore, waste generated by developed communities creates survival opportunities for others. The next role player in the waste system in the above figure is the buyback centres (D). If there is no waste and nobody to buy and recycle it, then there will be no incentive for the waste pickers to enter this sector. The waste is then delivered to the formal recycling companies (E).

Webster (2010) refers to Mills, a sociologist, who says that when a country is confronted with high unemployment rates (like South Africa) and with such a high number of waste pickers who try to make a living, it is not "personal trouble" but a "public issue". To be able to look at possible responses to this public issue of the increasing street waste pickers, researchers need to understand the socioeconomic context of the waste pickers, for example, who

they are, where they are from, what their qualifications and skills are, what they earn and who and how many people they are supporting. The answers to these questions are important to determine how this group could be accommodated and supported.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

Current research in South Africa focuses mainly on people who reclaim dumpsites (Chvatal, 2010; Samson, 2010; Theron, 2010). Samson (2010) found 19 studies conducted in South Africa on this subject, only five of which were on the street waste pickers in different cities. Research on the street waste pickers in South Africa is therefore limited and small scale (Webster, 2010; Langenhoven and Dyssel, 2007; McLean, 2000). In response to the lack of research and the need to understand who these people are, this research consists of an exploratory study into the socioeconomic circumstances of the people in this sector of the informal economy. The purpose of this study was to engage with this under researched social phenomenon in order to plan and develop follow up research and develop ideas on service delivery.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Research question

Research questions are formulated at the outset of a qualitative research project (Creswell, 1994) and they specify what intrigues the researcher. The research question further indicates the focus of the study (Maree, 2007).

The research question formulated for this study was:

What are the socioeconomic circumstances of the people collecting and selling recyclable waste?

Aim of the research

The aim of this research was to explore some of the socioeconomic circumstances of the people who collect recyclable waste in South Africa's cities and to use the results to inform further research into this sector of the informal economy. Creswell (2007) explains that qualitative research is conducted when a problem or issue needs to be explored and where the researchers are interested to hear the marginalised and silenced voices.

Research design

The best way to listen to the voices of the waste pickers was through a qualitative, exploratory research process. Qualitative research focuses on the meaning of the lived experiences of people in a particular context. It aims at exploring social relations, and describes reality as experienced by the participants (Sarantakos, 2005). An exploratory design is used when the research aim is to familiarise the researcher with the topic. This approach is normally used when researchers examine a new interest or when the subject of study itself is relatively new (Babbie, 2001).

The research population, sampling and sampling techniques

As the researchers did not know the population (hence the exploratory design) from which to draw the sample, convenience or accidental sampling was used. This sampling technique is an appropriate one in exploratory studies such as this. Convenience sampling is a process in which the researcher selects the respondents that can be accessed easily until the sample reaches the desired size (Collins, Du Plooy, Grobbelaar, Puttergill, Terreblanche, Van Eede, Van Rensburg and Wigston, 2001).

To apply this sampling technique, five fourth-year Social Work students from the Department of Social Work, University of South Africa (UNISA), (an open and distance learning university with students throughout South Africa) were used as fieldworkers and tasked to interview five street waste pickers each. One fieldworker, who works for an organisation rendering social work services to people who collect waste on a landfill site, interviewed five people on a landfill site. The other fieldworkers interviewed the street waste pickers where they could find them, either in the street or at the buyback centres. The only criterion was that the respondent had to be a street waste picker. The fieldworkers were trained in qualitative research methods and interviewing as part of their research module prior to this research.

In total 25 interviews were conducted. Five people each were interviewed in Durban, Pretoria, Cape Town, Johannesburg/Soweto and the landfill site in Port Elizabeth. Although the numbers are small in each city and no generalisations could be made from the data, the results were valuable. All the fieldworkers noted in their feedback reports that waste pickers were only willing to be interviewed after they had sold their waste for the day. This feedback is valuable for further research as to the best time to interview street waste pickers.

Data collection and analysis

Before data could be collected, the fieldworkers had to obtain the potential participants' consent to participate in the study. According to Grinnell and Williams (1996) and Neuman (2003), the word "consent" means that each person fully understands what is going to happen in the course of the study, why it is going to happen and what its effect will be on him or her.

The method of data collection used by the fieldworkers was semi-structured interviews. The students were all provided with a guideline with a few questions to be asked to draw out information, attitudes, opinions and beliefs around particular themes, ideas and issues (O'Leary, 2004). They had also all been trained in the data analysis method of Creswell (2007). Each fieldworker transcribed the interviews they conducted and sorted the data into themes and categories. The researchers then compiled the themes as identified by the fieldworkers. Patterns of similarities and differences were identified in the data analysis and ordered into themes. The similarities that emerged from the five different reports validated the identified themes (Ragin, 1994).

RESEARCH RESULTS

The research findings presented resulted from the analysis of the 25 interviews conducted with the waste pickers.

The discussion on the research findings is presented in two sections:

- the biographical profile of the participants; and
- a discussion on the themes and subthemes that emerged from the process of qualitative data analysis. Each of these will be supported by narratives from the transcribed interviews, and further complemented by a literature control.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA OF THE WASTE PICKERS

Of the 20 street waste pickers who were interviewed, 10 were male and 10 were female. The five people in the landfill group were all women. These women mainly collected food and other things for their personal use. Chvatal (2010) found that waste pickers at different landfill/dumping sites in the Western Cape (one of nine provinces in South Africa) had different gender compilations. Mainly males worked at the Stellenbosch landfill, while the Hermanus landfill pickers consisted mainly of females. Being a waste picker

is therefore not gender specific. The gender difference is more significant in the material they collect. Men collect heavier and more lucrative materials like metal, possibly because the women are not able to carry the heavy materials. Women tend to concentrate on paper and plastics (Samson, 2010).

The youngest waste picker in this study was 18 years old and the oldest 62. The biggest group was found in the 40 to 49 age range. Samson (2010), McLean (2000) and Langenhoven and Dyssel (2007) confirm this age group as the highest in their studies. Chvatal (2010) reports that the groups she met on the landfill sites in the Western Cape also included people over 60. According to Medina (2007), the collecting and selling of recyclable waste in China is done mainly by older people, especially women. They collect what they can use to support themselves and their families.

Significantly, 7 (28%) respondents indicated that they were married while 18 (72%) were single, divorced or widowed. This is illustrated in figure 2.

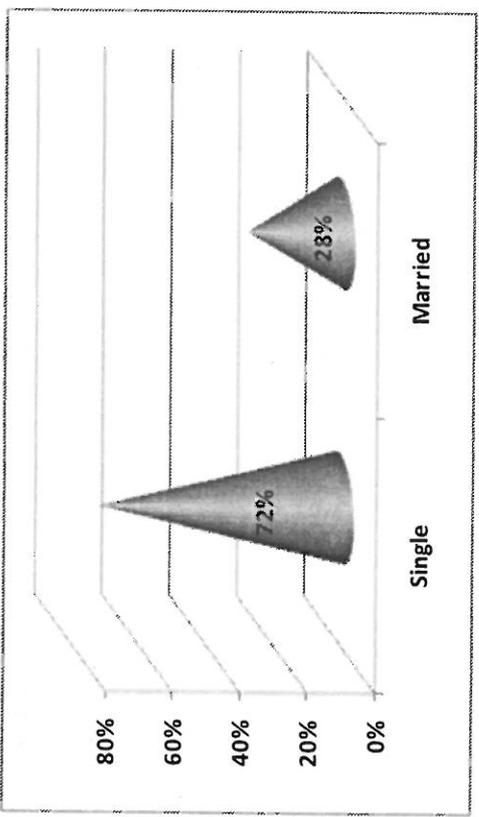


Figure 2: Marital status of waste pickers

The study by McLean (2000) confirms that there are more unmarried and unconnected waste pickers. Although mostly unmarried, only 2 (8%) had no dependants for whom they were financially responsible. The other 23 (92%) indicated that they had children and grandchildren dependant on them. Two women on the landfill site each had 10 people who depended on their income. One of the women told the fieldworker that she was responsible for her children and a sister with a mental disability. The woman even left her

previous work to protect her sister against men in the community who wanted take advantage of her mental disability. She further explained:

"I have been looking for fixed job since 2002 after I was retrenched. Until now I have no job. Just imagine have children to take care of, and they are schooling, they need food, they need uniform, they need school fees."

In McLean's study in Durban in 2000, 19 out of the 20 waste pickers she interviewed were responsible for at least 4 people each.

SOCIOECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE STREET WASTE PICKERS

Reasons for becoming a street waste picker

Reasons for becoming a street waste picker included aspects like their low educational level and waste picking as a barrier less access to an income.

Educational level of the street waste pickers

The low educational level of the waste pickers is a barrier to employment in the formal sector, as one of the waste pickers mentioned:

"I was once employed as a domestic worker and then my employers moved ... I tried to look for another job but could not find any. You see I am not educated so it is very hard to find a job for someone like myself and besides, I am old."

The educational level of the respondents confirms the above statement.

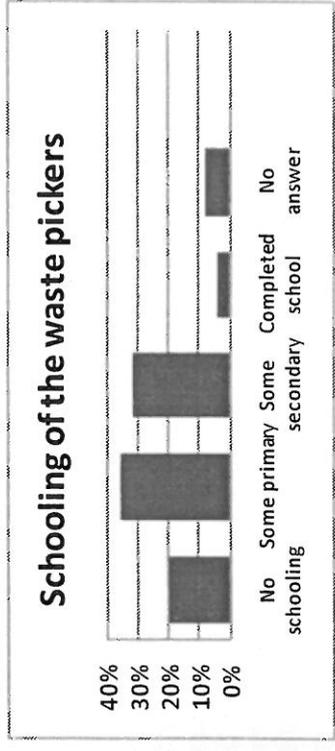


Figure 3: Schooling of the waste pickers

Two participants did not indicate their level of education and only one participant had completed school. Five (20%) indicated that they had not received any education and 36% (9) only had some primary education. Only 8 (32%) completed some secondary education. They indicated that they had to leave school for reasons such as the following:

- Failing
"I did matric, but I could not pass or complete it, I just dropped out"
- Finances
"I did standard six... My father was unable to pay for my fees - as a result I dropped out and started looking for a job."

Samson's literature review (2010) on waste pickers in Africa confirms the low literacy and educational levels of street waste pickers.

The following section investigates the migration pattern of the sample.

Migration from rural to urban

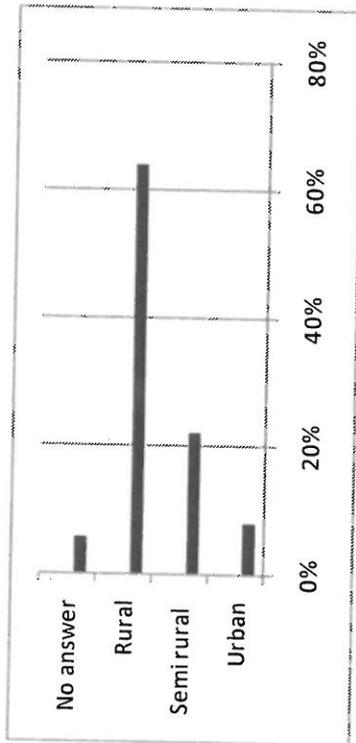


Figure 4: Migration pattern of the waste pickers

The results show that most of the waste pickers originally came from rural and semi-rural areas in order to earn a living in the cities. This is consistent with the existing literature, which indicates that most waste pickers in developing countries tend to be migrants from rural areas who come to urban areas in the hope of finding employment (Samson, 2010; Langenhoven and Dyssel, 2007; McLean, 2000; Medina, 1997).

Unemployment/poverty

"I have to push hard every day, I do not have a choice, little waste means little food for my family or even nothing at all."

Earnshaw (2007) states that poverty and hardship are the two things that force people into becoming waste pickers. Waste picking is an option for those who have been retrenched, retired, lost their jobs, have never worked before or who have been unable to enter the job market. It is a market that you can enter without having resources or education. The following comments from the waste pickers illustrate this:

"I was working at Rooiwal on a farm and were laid off"

"Housekeeper in Pretoria and laid off."

"Was not working."

"The reason why I lost my job is that I was bewitched by my neighbours to become ill for about one to two years."

"I was working at the clothing factory. Then the factory was closed down."

"I worked at Railway (Metrorail) company; I then lost my job there."

"I was working as a security guard for the past 22 years at Rosslyn factories in Pretoria North. I was then retrenched because of my age."

"I come from prison six years ago when I came back, I realised that it is the only way to survive... no one will employ an ex-convict."

"It was because of hunger. Sometimes you may find that at home there was no one helping me and my child with food. I then saw people collecting and selling recyclables, then I also decided to do the same."

Waste picking was further indicated as an opportunity to add to their income:

"When my last daughter got married, I stressed because she was the only one who was supporting me. I didn't want to break my daughter's marriage by always asking them money for food. Then I started collecting so that I can be able to put a plate of food on the table."

Work related aspects

Items collected and sold

In the Latin American countries (Medina, 2007) and in South Africa (Chvatal, 2010), people on landfill sites recycle and sell or use everything they can. Langenhoven and Dyssel (2007) indicate that at one of the landfill

sites in Durban, R66 000 worth of recyclables were retrieved each month by 300-400 waste pickers. Recyclables at the landfill sites are not only sold to formal recyclers but also to people looking for building material and other reusables. The fieldworker on the landfill site in Port Elizabeth mentioned the rotting vegetables that people collected to prepare for their families:

"It seems to me that a person would have to be desperate to eat."

In this study most of the respondents collect a mixture of recyclable waste, such as bottles, paper and tins, as this is what they can sell to the buyback centres. These objects are easily available in the streets at shebeens, (an unlicensed establishment selling alcoholic drink) taxi ranks and shops. What they collect depends on the proximity of the buyback centre and what the centre is willing to pay for the collected goods (Langenhoven and Dyssel, 2007; McLean, 2000).

Participants collecting scrap metal claimed that metal is scarce and difficult to find; if they did find it, they sometimes had to pay for it. However, participants also commented that they earned good and fast money from recycled metal. The following quotes indicate what goods they collect and from where:

"I collect tins, bottles, papers and plastics. I walk around the shopping centres and the nearest taverns picking them up. Before I can sell, I must make sure that I have collected at least 30 bags of the recyclables."

"I find them at taxi ranks and at the streets."

"I have arranged with owners of the shebeens (drinking place) that every morning I will come and collect tins and bottles. Other recyclable waste I get them on the streets in the taxi ranks and in the rubbish bins."

Langenhoven and Dyssel (2007) also confirm that the waste pickers know when the refuse bins are put on the roadsides and they collect what they can before the municipal waste trucks pick them up.

Working conditions

What became clear is that the process of collecting is hard work. Waste pickers walk long distances pushing heavy trolleys:

"We push this trolley it is very heavy as it is strong..., I start to collect from Naledi and continue right until Protea Glen ..., I get up early before people are up because if I go when people are up, I will only collect little..."

Earnshaw (2007) states that waste picking requires long hours on the street, involves exposure to harsh weather conditions and is time-consuming:

"...people have to commit ever-increasing amount of time to make this effective..."

In the words of one of the reclaimers:

"I feel sad doing this job because of body pains. I do a lot of walking for the whole day in order to find the recyclable waste."

An elderly waste picker also said that he was old and easily got tired. He has to walk a long way in and around Sunnyside, Pretoria to collect the waste. Another concern participants mentioned was the impact of working with recyclable goods on their health:

"I am sick and it has been four years now that I am suffering from this cough. My eyes are also troubling me, probably because of the sun I think this cough is due to coldness in the morning, the waste that I collect, dust and we come across lots of toxic material."

"I have to be careful when smashing the bottles so that they don't get into my eyes."

Another risk that the participants mentioned was being exposed to criminal activities:

"In winter, the morning and night are dark and one cannot see properly while rushing to collect as many as possible. I nearly got raped if it was not because of some boy who came to rescue me..."

Langenhoven and Dyssel (2007) confirm that robbery was cited by their respondents as being a problem. Some waste pickers are even robbed of the little money they have earned for the day.

Sleeping place

Street waste pickers are often observed sleeping on the street, under bushes and bridges and in front of shops. It became clear from the interviews that shelter is a major issue for the waste pickers. Some indicated that they go home over the weekend or sleep in shacks or in informal settlements. One waste picker in Pretoria indicated that he visited his family in Soweto, Johannesburg over the weekend. McLean (2000) also found that most of the waste pickers sleep on the streets and seldom go home as they cannot afford to go home or pay for a place to sleep.

Waste pickers' earnings and economic vulnerability

It was very difficult to determine the income of the waste pickers as the fieldworkers did not get the same response to the question regarding what they earned. They explained their income in different terms, i.e. some in daily and others in monthly terms. Some indicated what they earned per trolley. The fieldworkers reported that an amount of R50 (approximately \$7.33) per day is the one mentioned the most by the respondents. This is an important area for further research to be able to more accurately quantify the extent of the vulnerability of this group of people in our society. Similar income findings were made by McLean (2000). Langenhoven and Dyssel (2007) report that 75% of the respondents in their study earned less than R80 per week while 25% earned over a R100 per week. One of the respondents said he earned R40-R150 for a trolley full of metal. It is not clear how long it takes to collect a "trolley full of metal".

Some indicated what they earned in a month:

"I have last sell in April this year and only got R190,00 for the month."

One indicated that he could earn between R190 and R600 per month. Another indicated that he earned R140 for 10 bags of smashed tins. How long it takes to collect the 10 bags is not clear.

To determine earnings, very specific questions regarding income need to be asked in follow-up studies. Samson (2010) maintains that waste pickers have some of the lowest levels of income in the informal sector.

The Treasury Department's benchmark for the poverty line is R450 per month. It is then quite obvious that the majority of the waste pickers are struggling to earn enough to rise above the poverty line. They live, according to Langenhoven and Dyssel (2007), from "hand to mouth". This means they have very little opportunity to improve their own quality of life and that of their children. There is evidence that the already low income levels of the waste pickers are under serious threat from an oversupply of labour, as new people continuously enter this sector, as one of the waste pickers stated:

"Because everyone who is experiencing hunger want to do this job."

This pattern was also found in a nationwide study on day labourers in South Africa. The increasing number of day labourers in South Africa indicates that they constitute the "fall out" from the formal sector of the economy (Blaauw, 2010).

Perceptions of the waste pickers

Some positive perceptions about waste picking

The research found that there are some positive externalities from this activity which, while not easily quantifiable, were very tangible for the waste pickers:

"I am my own boss, no one tells me or instruct me what to do, what, when and how."

"If I am not feeling well I don't come and if I am well I do come to work."

"This job keeps me busy so I don't get bored at home."

"I get lots of exercise, so that I don't become very old. It also helps to strengthen my knees."

Perceptions about themselves

The participants felt both good and bad about themselves as waste pickers, despite the negative treatment or attitude they received from the majority of the public. They indicated that they did earn an income. The money they earned allowed them to make a living and to support themselves and others. The following storyline attests to this:

"I get an old age grant, and my grant wasn't enough to support them [dependants] all."

They further saw themselves as playing a vital role in ensuring that their country was kept clean and tidy. They took care of the environment while making money. Some negative experiences expressed were articulated as follows:

"Stress, frustration, confusion, rejection, sadness and loss of self worth."

"I feel so sad doing this job and I was so stressed."

"I cannot help it, I have to continue whether I like it or not. It is the only way to survive."

These respondents seemed unhappy about their work, but had no other way of earning an income.

Public's perceptions as expressed by the waste pickers

Society generally ascribes the lowest status to waste picking (Medina, 2007). Waste pickers mentioned the humiliating way they were treated by the public because they lived from other people's rubbish bins.

"...some people are ok and they even encourage us while others look at us like we are hobos."

Although some members of the public respected and valued their jobs as waste pickers, most simply looked down on them and treated them with no respect at all:

"They do not treat us as people who are worthy of respect. As a person who has no dignity and a person who is not important."

"You know in this world the type of job you are doing defines you."

"The public don't understand that we are doing a great job, because there is no one who collects and sell waste, then there will be no newspapers, new bottles, plastics and tins."

Medina (2007) further states that, owing to their daily contact with rubbish, waste pickers are usually associated with dirt, disease, squalor and perceived as a nuisance, a symbol of backwardness and even as criminals. They have to survive in a hostile physical and social environment and are often the focus of cleaning up campaigns by the police (see also Langenhoven and Dyssel, 2007). Medina (2007) reports an incident in Colombia in 1994, where 2000 "disposable" waste pickers were killed as a result of a social cleansing campaign.

Waste pickers' experiences of the buyback centres

It is evident that the relationship between the buyback centres and the waste pickers is symbiotic in that both benefit from one another. The success of the buyback centres rests on the amount of material supplied to them by the waste pickers (Langenhoven and Dyssel, 2007). However, some of the waste pickers in this study claimed that they were robbed and exploited by the buyers:

"...they use their scale to weigh our waste, I do not know how their scale works.... we accept anything ...there is nothing we can do."

"They rob us, they use their scale and I do not how it works, they did explain how the scale works, but we cannot read or write."

Medina (2007) also gives examples of Colombian, Indian and Mexican cities where the waste pickers can receive as little as 5% of the price industry pays for recyclables, while the middlemen enjoy high profits. Rogerson (2001:254) confirms this exploited position of the waste pickers when he states that "the majority of the informal sector are poorly organised and often exist in highly exploitative relations to both middle man and recycling companies".

On the other hand, some waste pickers said that they were treated very well. These participants did not feel that they were being cheated or seriously underpaid:

"Truly speaking, they are treating us good."

"People at the scrap yard treat me as an angel because I am their customer."

"They treating us fairly and they also have respect for us. They know that we are in business with them and if they do not respect us, they will lose us."

This last comment suggests that the waste pickers are not totally powerless – after all, the middlemen cannot survive without the waste pickers.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article gives a glimpse into the experiences and socioeconomic circumstances of the waste pickers in South African society. This study shows that recycling offers unskilled, unemployed people the opportunity to enter the informal economy to survive. For some it is their only source of income and for others it helps to augment their grants or meagre earnings, thus enabling them to support their dependants. However, their working circumstances are harsh and unhealthy and they face social humiliation.

At the beginning of this article there was a reference to Mills (in Webster, 2010) who indicated that the high number of waste pickers in South Africa makes it a "public issue". This public issue, Mills argues, should be addressed in ways that will "take workers as they are", regardless of their skills, education or personal characteristics. Mills argues that upgrading people's skills and knowledge should be the second step - "with much of the training occurring on the job" (Webster, 2010:228). This article attempted to describe who these people are.

Social development attempts to harmonise social and economic development goals and invest in human capacities. It also promotes the inclusion of

the socially excluded in development activities to achieve socio and economic justice (Patel, 2005). This research then makes an important contribution to social development by identifying the potential role of the social work practitioner in this area of the informal economy.

The social service professional can help to "accommodate the people as they are" at different levels. At the simplest level, psychosocial support can be offered to the waste pickers and their dependants. Secondly, awareness of the value of the waste pickers can be created and social service professionals can facilitate processes where people assist the waste pickers by giving them gloves, protected shoes, clothes and masks to become better waste pickers. A higher level of involvement might be at policy level, where waste pickers are officially recognised and accommodated as part of the waste management system, provided that all the role players in this system buy into the idea and its implementation. They can also be assisted to organise and create cooperatives, so that they can claim their own space in the formal or informal economy. This will strengthen their bargaining position with industry and, in particular, local government, enabling them to become actors in their own development process and hopefully raise themselves above the poverty level (Medina, 2008).

As stated at the beginning of this article, this study was undertaken to inform further research, since, at present, little research has been done on this sector of the informal economy. Studying the dynamics of this informal economy activity is of great importance in the current broader policy discussion about the informal economy.

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ECHOES OF A PRIMAL SCREAM: AIDS AND FOSTERING IN BOTSWANA

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ABSTRACT

The paper considers the meaning of family and the concept of social welfare in the context of the southern African country of Botswana. The changing nature of the society and the impact of HIV and AIDS have necessitated the formulation of policies relevant to the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children in particular. The strain on kinship systems and consequent lack of appropriate nurturing, as well as a relative dearth of alternative family type support systems, prompted the development of a programme of statutory foster care in the country. In 1997 the process of institutionalising this form of care commenced and, in 2011, it is still in its infancy (apparent testimony to the tenacity of custom and culture). This paper analyses the background to the programme, issues surrounding its footprint in Botswana, current developments, and potential advantages to, as well as challenges for, the society. Many of these issues resonate in other African countries and are thus of interest to the region as a whole.

Key words:

AIDS, foster care, statutory instruments, culture