



# Bin picking an asset

KAREN WATKINS

**B**in pickers are often the bane of people's lives, but a recent study has found they can save municipalities a whopping R700 million a year.

Maxwell Snell can make R200 to R300 a day by scratching through wheelie bins and funneling reusable goods to the recycling depots.

Loading a DSTV dish onto his already piled-high trolley, he says he relies on recycling to feed his four children. And Wynberg is a good place to do it.

He leaves his Lavender Hill home at 5am every day to rifle through rubbish for recyclables which he packs into bags, ties onto his trolley and then drags to the Retreat recycling depot.

It is very heavy, but he is very fit, and he is one of many who do this. Yet little is known about the role waste pickers play in the economy and factors that enable them to make a living, until recently.

Academics in the fields of social work, economics and nutrition, affiliated to the Department of Science and Technology and the



■ Study finds that waste pickers are offering a free service to remove recyclable items from landfill sites.

National Research Foundation's Centre of Excellence in Food Security (COE) found that waste pickers generated R700m a year.

Under the guidance of the principal investigator, Professor Rinie (Caterina) Schenck, of the University of the Western Cape, the research team's findings show that

in the first quarter of 2014 there were 2.4 million people, or 12,3% of the South African labour force of approximately 20 million, trying to make a living in the informal economy.

This excludes the agricultural sector.

Given that South Africa has



■ Maxwell Snell's day starts at 5am, collecting recyclables in Wynberg.

one of the highest unemployment rates in the world (25.2%), more people should theoretically be able to enter the informal economy.

In India, for example, about 90% of the population make a living in the informal sector. The research team therefore wanted to

know if the low number of people in the South African informal economy is an indication of an environment that is not very enabling.

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# Authorities should consider bin pickers' input

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The study shows that most waste pickers do the work to survive.

Agnes Cupido, who lives in Bonnytoun informal settlement, is one of them and has been doing this for "many years".

As she delivers her bags of plastic and glass bottles, white paper and some metal to a scrap dealer in Lester Road in Wynberg, the manager of the store, Dawn Felix, says they will fetch about R14.

Ms Felix says most scrap metal comes from construction sites, while geysers are from a nearby plumber. Identity documents are required for certain items, including copper and brass, and they turn away drain covers, taps and pipes.

Professor Schenck says waste pickers are here to stay and existing national, provincial and local policy planning priorities should incorporate waste picking as a permanent phenomenon.

Policies need TO take into account the voice of the waste pickers themselves and social workers should facilitate the process, she says.

Findings in the report reveal that while collecting recyclables, more than half of the waste pickers, collect food as well. In some cases, the food is brought to the dump in containers and many waste pickers will eat it.

Professor Schenck says the pickers reported not getting sick

from eating the food, saying they can tell when food is fine to eat by smell, taste and touch. Bin pickers canvassed in Wynberg say they do not collect food or drink.

Diep River police spokesperson, Constable Zak Marais, says they do not have a problem with bin pickers, but criminals sometimes use wheelie bins to get over walls or carry off their loot.

"We urge the community to place wheelie bins out on the morning of collections only and not the night before and to paint your street name and number on the bin. If you cannot place your bin out on time for day of collection, arrange with your neighbours to assist each other."

Wynberg Improvement District manager, Athol Swanson, says the area has a very active and efficient recycling drop-off at the City's Rosmead Avenue facility which accepts recyclable material, garden refuse, builders' rubble and electrical goods.

Wynberg Residents' and Ratepayers' Association (WRRRA) chairperson, Kristina Davidson says bin pickers are problematic for many residents, because of the mess they leave after going through the bins. However, for others, they provide a valuable recycling service that also lets them earn a living.

Most problems arise, she says, when residents put out their rubbish bins at night, providing

an opportunity for criminals to masquerade as bin pickers.

However, thanks to growing awareness, residents are starting to put out their bins in the morning – and bin pickers simply wait until the morning.

One way of preventing bin pickers from making a mess is to put recyclable items on top of the bin – or perhaps have a separate bin for recyclables.

Sandy Roman, of Plumstead, also does this by sorting her waste, packing recyclable items in bags inside her wheelie bin, ready for bin pickers to take. She never leaves the bin out the night before.

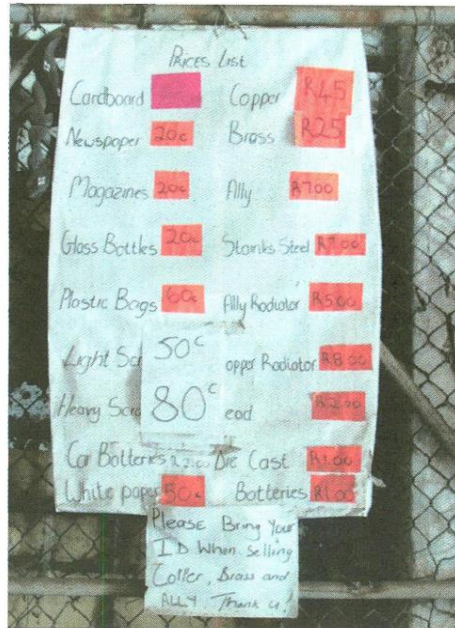
"Some residents are paranoid about bin pickers but they value their freedom and don't want to be locked up hence are not looking to commit crime," says Ms Roman.

Linda Howe-Ely also uses the Rosmead depot and if she has anything useful she leaves it on top of the bin.

"There needs to be more value attached to recyclable items, such as a deposit on plastic bottles, to prevent them being thrown away," says Ms Howe-Ely.

Professor Schenck says waste pickers are essentially offering a free service to remove recyclable items from the landfill sites.

This saves money in terms of landfill space, as well as the indirect costs of recycling and waste management. They can, she says, be viewed as part of a



■ An ID is required for certain items, including copper and brass.

problem or the solution. Deciding on the first option, she argues, will be counter-productive and could represent a significant lost opportunity.

The City of Cape Town were asked to comment on the study but had not done so by the time the Bulletin went to print.

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