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Managing waste pickers on landfills in South Africa: Considering policies and practices towards socio economic development

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A key element of recycling is the efforts by an estimated 60,000 to 90,000 South African waste pickers who make a living from recycling from landfill sites. The waste pickers' recycling activities that are at the lower end of the recycling value chain have, over the years, played a key role in the recycling process of mainline recyclable waste. The waste pickers' activities save municipalities in South Africa an estimated amount of R 750 million per annum. Supporting and integrating waste pickers in a variety of ways in the waste management plans of municipalities are becoming critical. Research has shown that waste management policies and practices influence the waste pickers' access to recyclable waste and their livelihoods directly. Access to waste is the most critical aspect that affects waste pickers, as it influences their potential income. The different policy and management approaches followed by municipalities in their attempts to adhere to the National Waste Management Strategy and the Polokwane Declaration may have unintended and devastating consequences for the vulnerable waste pickers. This paper describes the results from the collective case study research design followed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data of the waste pickers and landfill managers on nine landfill sites in South Africa. The paper highlights key unintended consequences for the vulnerable livelihoods and quality of life of landfill waste pickers stemming from each policy and management approach. The presentation describes different policy and management strategies on nine landfill sites in South Africa and the unintended consequences on the livelihoods of the waste pickers. The results indicate that, although well intentioned, decisions made without consulting the waste pickers may have exclusionary consequences. It is recommended that the co-existence and co-production of the waste pickers and the municipalities should be based on inclusive and participative decision-making processes.

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