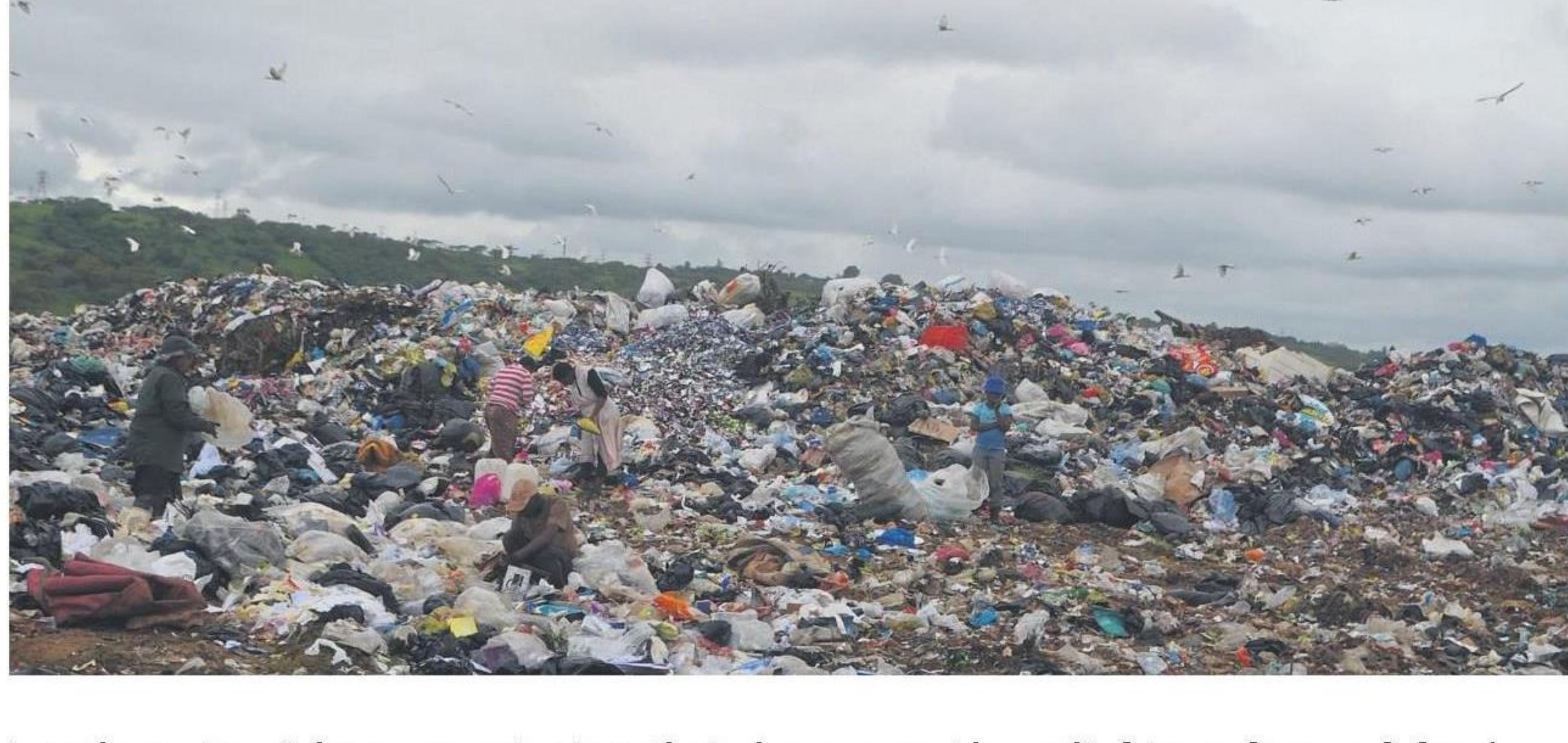


'My cupboard is empty'



Local waste pickers are pinning their hopes on the relief in a form of food vouchers that have been donated by the packaging industry.

NOKUTHULA NTULI

PIETERMARITZBURG waste pickers fear their families will die of starvation before Covid-19 gets to them if government does not fast track lockdown relief for them.

They were responding to the news that the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF), in partnership with the packaging industry, has secured a plan to assist waste pickers countrywide who have lost their livelihoods during the national lockdown period.

"Working with industry and the waste reclaimers associations, we will be distributing electronic food vouchers to waste pickers' cell phones over the coming days," said DEFF Minister, Barbara Creecy in a statement.

The local pickers have not been to the dumps since March 26 and many do not receive social grants as they are not South Africans.

Father of four Sibongiseni Mbense said he could not support his family unless he worked at least six days a week. "I make about R300 a week from selling recycled waste. It's not much but it's better than sitting at home like I am right now while my children are starving," he said.

He has been working as a waste picker at the New England Road landfill site for eight years but said he did not make enough to save for rainy days.

"This lockdown has been really hard for us waste pickers. Our families barely have enough to eat right now. We've been reduced to begging for help from our neighbours and relatives. We are all pinning our

hopes on the relief that the department is rolling out but we can't wait for weeks."

Smero's Nozipho Mbongwa said the R450 child support grant she receives for her six-year-old son is not enough to cover their groceries for a month.

"I have to pay R200 for scholar transport every month and travelling to the dump costs me R28 a day. If I don't work I have to skip some meals so that at least my son can eat and that's what's been happening now," she said.

She said the owners of the car that provides scholar transport have also told the parents that they have to pay the monthly fare even though it is lockdown, but she cannot afford to make her payment.

"I used all the grant money on food but my cupboard is now empty ..."

Yesterday Groundwork's waste campaigner, Musa Chamane, said: "The situation is really sad and that's why some waste pickers are even taking risks and going to the dumps which is dangerous because people are also dumping masks and tissues there and those could be carrying the virus."

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He is busy compiling lists of waste pickers to submit to DEFF so that they can get relief. The Pietermaritzburg list already had more than 700 names yesterday afternoon. Chamane said the relief should be for all the pickers, not just those who are South African. His fear is that there might not be enough funds to assist all the waste pickers as the relief is donor-funded, but hopes that other companies will come on board.

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