

COMMENT



WASTE PICKERS' STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION

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YESTERDAY was International World Waste Pickers Day. On March 1, the SA Waste Pickers Association (Sawpa), and millions of waste pickers globally recognise their struggles across the world.

We remember March 1 as the day workers fighting for the right to a decent life and work, paid with their lives. On March 1, 1992, 11 waste pickers were brutally killed in Columbia, igniting the spark of resistance in waste pickers across the world, and the need to fight for recognition and respect.

Waste pickers existed before industrialisation. For years, waste pickers found themselves picking up the discarded products produced by industrialisation for reuse, repair and recycling to earn a living.

Sawpa was formed to promote, protect and defend the rights of waste pickers. When groundWork, our partner, challenged the failure of the government to manage waste dump sites across the country, it found many people working in the spaces, picking recyclable materials, selling them and earning an honest living.

Waste pickers, the government said, were not allowed to be there and it often used violent means to push waste pickers from their place of work. But waste pickers took the risk anyway to support themselves and their families, and, in the process, contribute positively towards effective waste management in municipalities.

Waste pickers working on dump sites and in streets were looking for a voice to represent them, their interests and well-being. GroundWork's waste campaign paved the way for waste pickers to organise in South Africa.

In Parliament in 2007, when SA's first democratic waste legislation was being developed, the Environment Department called for a ban of waste pickers from dump sites. Waste pickers and groundWork went to Parliament to resist the move that would've taken away people's livelihoods and resulted in the privatisation of their space.

Consequently, pickers were recognised as legitimate stakeholders in municipal waste-management systems. In 2009, waste pickers from across the country formed Sawpa.

From its birth, Sawpa built alliances with other organisations nationally and internationally. GroundWork, Friends of the Earth International, Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising, and Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternative became the main partners.

Sawpa has engaged government at local and national level for recognition of waste pickers as stakeholders in waste management. This resulted in guidelines to integrate waste pickers into waste-management systems for all municipalities. Industries are also required to consult and engage with waste pickers when drafting industry waste management plans.

Over the past 12 years, Sawpa has stopped two waste-to-energy projects proposals in South Africa. It also assisted many waste pickers to organise into structures like Roms in Pretoria, African Recyclers Organisation in Johannesburg and Metsimaholo Recycling Forum in Sasolburg to be supported and funded.

Research has shown that waste pickers play an important role in waste management, and in the recycling economy, alleviating poverty and mitigating emissions. We are yet to see meaningful support towards waste pickers by the government or private sector. Policies at local level are not favourable towards waste pickers and their work. Private sector support always focuses on profit making.

Waste pickers and other environmentalists have been calling for a new approach and a system that doesn't see waste at all. A revolution – zero waste. It is the only approach that values the environment and the people who manage society's waste.

The coronavirus has shown the world needs to change how we manage and dispose of waste. As waste pickers, we are calling for zero-waste programmes in all municipalities and separation of waste into organic and inorganic to be mandatory. We are also calling for waste pickers to be compensated by municipalities for their service, and for manufacturers and producers to compensate waste pickers for recovery and recycling of their products. A luta continua!

Mbata is the national co-ordinator of the SA Waste Pickers Association