

# ERSA Research Brief

April 2016

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## **Sometimes you don't make enough money to buy food: An analysis of South African street waste pickers income**

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One of the aims of the National Development Plan (NDP) is the eradication of poverty and the reduction of inequality (NPC, 2011, p. 354). To ensure that “individuals are engaged in meaningful activity, and vulnerable groups and citizens are protected from the worst effects of poverty”, effective policies are needed (National Planning Commission, 2011, p. 409). Policies should further be based on informed decisions. Policies based on uninformed decisions, might harm the intended beneficiaries.

Street waste pickers are one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups of people in terms of poverty and are often regarded as the poorest citizens of a country (Bonner, 2008, p. 7; Dias & Alves, 2008, p. 6; McLean, 2000, p. 20; Sarkar, 2003, p. 454; Scheinberg, Anschütz & van de Klundert, 2006, p. 6; Westerhoff, 2010, p. 1; WIEGO, 2011, p. 1). They make a living collecting and selling other people's waste in the informal economy. Street waste pickers are vulnerable to low incomes and high levels of insecurity.

This paper assesses street waste pickers' income and determines the possible factors that may influence their income. A good understanding of the factors that influence street waste pickers' income can assist policy-makers to make informed decisions in designing and implementing policies aimed at improving the street waste pickers' income-earning potential.

The study uses primary data from the first ever national survey among street waste pickers in South Africa. Qualitative and quantitative data of 914 street waste pickers and 64 buy-back centres (BBCs) across 13 major cities in South Africa were collected between April 2011 and June 2012. A non-probability sampling technique, namely snowball sampling, was used as there was no sampling frame available on the number of street waste pickers in South Africa. A total of 873 street waste pickers were willing to reveal their income as part of the above survey. These waste pickers' data form the basis of the analysis.

Using a cross-sectional regression analysis and logistic regression analysis, the results show that variables under the direct control of street waste pickers may have a small positive effect on their income. These are the use of a trolley and the hours worked. Another important aspect emanating from the results of the income analysis is that most of the variance in their income is caused by the prices of the recyclable waste collected and the volume and mix collected. Street waste pickers have very little influence on the prices they receive for the waste and the quantity and quality of the waste available to them. The average street waste pickers can themselves therefore do little to increase their income.

Local governments however, can play an important role in protecting and enhancing the income-earning opportunities of street waste pickers. Local governments should create an environment in which higher quantities of quality waste are made accessible to the street waste pickers. One such initiative is the 'separation of waste at source' initiative. The benefits of a well-considered system of 'separation at source' will provide street waste pickers access to bigger volumes of semi-sorted waste, as well as higher quality waste which will enhance their income-earning opportunities.

Local governments should further facilitate infrastructure such as Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs), sorting facilities, and more efficient BBCs to assist street waste pickers to collect and sell higher volumes of waste. It is difficult for street waste pickers to sort and clean the waste properly without a place or space to sort the waste. Therefore, there is an urgent need for sorting and storage space to enable street waste pickers to sort the waste they have collected properly as better-sorted and higher quality waste reach higher prices.

More collection points along certain routes where BBCs collect the waste from the street waste pickers can reduce the distances over which the heavy loads of waste have to be carried amid traffic in dangerous conditions.

Policy-makers should as a point of departure acknowledge that street waste pickers are among the most vulnerable groups of informal economy participants. Most of the street waste pickers were pushed into these informal economy activities to try and make a living because they had no other choice.

Although they experience high poverty levels, and are the lowest income earners in the recycling chain, these activities provide them with a livelihood. Policy-makers should therefore ensure that their income-generating opportunities are protected.

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