



# *“To earn money for myself, I would much rather climb the mountain”*: The experiences of landfill waste pickers in East London, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences and vulnerabilities of landfill waste pickers in East London, South Africa, through the lens of Beck’s Risk Society Theory, which frames their daily realities as products of systemic and socially manufactured risks. Landfill waste pickers operate in hazardous environments where economic survival intersects with exposure to toxic waste, emotional trauma, and social exclusion. Positioned within these risk-laden contexts, they embody the contradictions of modern society, where those mitigating environmental harm remain unprotected and invisible within formal structures. To investigate these experiences, the study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, with this article focusing on the qualitative phase. Twelve participants were selected through convenience sampling, and data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that waste pickers face multiple, intersecting vulnerabilities, including health hazards, food insecurity, lack of identity documents, and exclusion from social welfare programmes. Despite these challenges, they contribute significantly to environmental sustainability and the recycling economy. Interpreted within the framework of Developmental Social Work (DSW), the study highlights the urgent need to recognise waste pickers as active economic agents that deserve inclusion, social protection, and empowerment. It concludes that a rights-based developmental approach, grounded in social justice, is essential to transform their resilience into empowerment and ensure that those who sustain the environment are no longer left behind.

**Keywords:** Landfill sites, South Africa, Sustainable Development Goals, waste pickers, waste management.

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of urban populations globally has resulted in a corresponding escalation in municipal solid waste generation.<sup>1</sup> This growth in waste production increasingly conflicts with the

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<sup>1</sup> Catherina J Schenck et al., “The Management of South Africa’s Landfills and Waste Pickers on Them: Impacting Lives and Livelihoods,” *Development Southern Africa* 36, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 80–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2018.1483822>.

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aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly Goal 6 on clean water and sanitation, Goal 11 on sustainable cities and communities, and Goal 12 on responsible consumption and production.<sup>2</sup> These goals collectively seek to mitigate environmental degradation and improve living conditions; however, as Oelofse cautions, partial or fragmented implementation of the SDGs significantly undermines the effectiveness of waste management systems.<sup>3</sup>

Despite global, continental, and national policy commitments such as Agenda 2063: *The Africa We Want* and South Africa's National Waste Management Strategy, the practical implementation of effective waste governance remains constrained.<sup>4</sup> Persistent infrastructural deficiencies, inadequate enforcement capacity, and suboptimal waste management practices continue to weaken municipal systems.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, large volumes of waste are still disposed of in landfills, open dumps, and poorly managed sites, exacerbating environmental and public health risks.<sup>6</sup>

Globally, an estimated 2.01 billion tonnes of municipal solid waste are generated annually, with approximately one-third of this waste not managed in an environmentally sustainable manner.<sup>7</sup> This trajectory is expected to worsen, with projections indicating that global waste generation will exceed 2.2 billion tonnes by 2025.<sup>8</sup> In many developing contexts, including South Africa, municipalities continue to struggle with waste disposal due to resource constraints and limited technical capacity.<sup>9</sup> This reflects a broader governance gap at the international, national, and local levels to achieve coordinated and sustainable waste management systems.<sup>10</sup>

In response to these systemic challenges, waste picking has emerged as a critical livelihood strategy within the informal economy, particularly in contexts marked by high unemployment and poverty.<sup>11</sup> Waste pickers recover recyclable materials from landfill sites and sell them to buy-back centres (BBCs), which subsequently supply recycling companies, thus contributing to resource recovery and waste diversion. In some instances, materials are also sold to independent intermediaries that facilitate transactions between waste pickers and formal recycling networks.<sup>12</sup> This informal recycling system operates in parallel with formal municipal waste management structures.

Although landfills provide essential income-generating opportunities, waste pickers operate under precarious and hazardous conditions. Exposure to unsafe waste, including medical and toxic materials, remains a significant risk.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, landfill environments are often characterised by inadequate occupational health and safety provisions, including limited access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and insufficient awareness of occupational hazards, thereby compromising the health and wellbeing of workers.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, "The 17 Goals," 2015, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

<sup>3</sup> S. H. H. Oelofse, "Reporting on the SDGs – a Focus on Waste Reporting in the 2019 South Africa Country - WasteCon" (Gauteng, February 9, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), *National Waste Information Baseline Report*, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Schenck et al., "The Management of South Africa's Landfills and Waste Pickers on Them: Impacting Lives and Livelihoods."

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), "Global Waste Management Outlook," 2019, <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/global-waste-management-outlook-2019>.

<sup>7</sup> Abiodun Olusola Omotayo et al., "What Drives Households' Payment for Waste Disposal and Recycling Behaviours? Empirical Evidence from South Africa's General Household Survey," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 19 (October 1, 2020): 7188, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17197188>.

<sup>8</sup> Solomon E Uhumamure, Joshua N Edokpayi, and Karabo Shale, "Occupational Health Risk of Waste Pickers: A Case Study of Northern Region of South Africa," *Journal of Environmental and Public Health* 2021, no. 1 (2021): 5530064.

<sup>9</sup> Schenck et al., "The Management of South Africa's Landfills and Waste Pickers on Them: Impacting Lives and Livelihoods."

<sup>10</sup> International Energy Agency (IEA), "Global Waste Management Outlook 2021," <https://www.iea.org/reports/global-waste-management-outlook-2021>, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Rinie Schenck, Derick Blaauw, and Kotie Viljoen, "Enabling Factors for the Existence of Waste Pickers: A Systematic Review," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 52, no. 1 (2016): 35–53.

<sup>12</sup> M. Samson, "Wasting Value and Valuing Waste: Insights into the Global Crisis and the pro-Duction of Value Reclaimed from a Soweto Garbage Dump." (York University, 2012); K. Viljoen, P.F. Blaauw, and C.J. Schenck, "The Opportunities and Value-Adding Activities of Buy-Back Centres in South Africa's Recycling Industry: A Value Chain Analysis," *Local Economy* 34, no. 3 (2019): 294–315; Schenck, Blaauw, and Viljoen, "Enabling Factors for the Existence of Waste Pickers: A Systematic Review."

<sup>13</sup> Shonisani E. Tshivhase et al., "Occupational Health and Safety Hazards among Solid Waste Handlers at a Selected Municipality South Africa," *Health SA Gesondheid* 27 (December 9, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hsag.v27i0.1978>.

<sup>14</sup> Solomon E. Uhumamure, Joshua N. Edokpayi, and Karabo Shale, "Occupational Health Risk of Waste Pickers: A Case Study of Northern Region of South Africa," *Journal of Environmental and Public Health* 2021 (August 30, 2021): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1155/2021/5530064>; M.K. Ditema, "The Prevalence of Occupational Injuries among Waste Pickers in Landfill Sites: A Johannesburg Case Study" (University of Johannesburg, 2023).

Additional vulnerabilities include food insecurity, as waste pickers often rely on discarded food from households, retail outlets, and industrial sites, increasing the risk of poor nutritional intake and health complications.<sup>15</sup> These intersecting challenges underscore the precarious nature of waste picking as a livelihood strategy.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to explore the central research question: *What are the challenges experienced by landfill waste pickers at the East London landfill site?*

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of scholarship has examined landfill systems and the role of waste pickers in global and South African contexts. These studies have been instrumental in demonstrating the socio-economic importance of informal recycling and the contribution of waste pickers to municipal waste diversion and circular economy processes.<sup>16</sup> However, while these works acknowledge environmental degradation and occupational precarity, they do not sufficiently or explicitly conceptualise landfills as “risk society” spaces where structural inequality, environmental harm, and governance failure intersect in sustained and systemic ways.<sup>17</sup> This represents a critical analytical limitation in the literature, as the broader socio-ecological risks embedded in landfill environments remain under-theorised.

Comparative international studies further demonstrate that waste pickers operate under highly precarious conditions characterised by exposure to hazardous waste, physical injuries, and unstable income generation. In both African and Global South contexts, research has consistently documented challenges such as lack of protective equipment, weak institutional recognition, and social exclusion from formal waste management systems.<sup>18</sup> More recent scholarship also draws attention to gendered vulnerabilities, particularly the disproportionate risks faced by women waste pickers, including harassment, limited access to valuable recyclables, and reduced bargaining power within informal waste economies.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, emerging health-oriented studies link prolonged exposure to landfill environments with non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as respiratory,<sup>20</sup> skin conditions, and chronic infections, reinforcing the long-term health burden associated with this livelihood.<sup>21</sup> Contextually, this dimension remains underdeveloped within South African scholarship, which has not sufficiently foregrounded landfills as sites of risk society, despite their simultaneous role as critical yet hazardous socio-economic spaces. Landfills thus emerge as paradoxical spaces, marked by environmental and occupational risk on the one hand, and serving as essential livelihood assets for waste pickers striving for survival and sustenance on the other.<sup>22</sup>

Despite these documented challenges, waste pickers remain central to waste valorisation systems, recovering significant volumes of recyclable materials and contributing to environmental sustainability and municipal efficiency.<sup>23</sup> They function as an essential yet marginalised workforce within both formal and informal waste economies, thereby sustaining recycling value chains that would

<sup>15</sup> Schenck et al., “The Management of South Africa’s Landfills and Waste Pickers on Them: Impacting Lives and Livelihoods”; N. Mudavanhu, “An Analysis of Livelihood of Landfill Waste Pickers in South Africa” (University of the Western Cape, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Samson, “Wasting Value and Valuing Waste: Insights into the Global Crisis and the pro-Duction of Value Reclaimed from a Soweto Garbage Dump.”; Schenck, Blaauw, and Viljoen, “Enabling Factors for the Existence of Waste Pickers: A Systematic Review”; Alpha Koroma, Rebecca Scott, and James Esson, “Informal Waste Pickers in Africa: Social Reproduction, Marginalisation and Sustainability,” *Local Environment*, December 4, 2025, 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2025.2596724>.

<sup>17</sup> Oelofse, “Reporting on the SDGs – a Focus on Waste Reporting in the 2019 South Africa Country - WasteCon”; International Energy Agency (IEA), “Global Waste Management Outlook 2021.”

<sup>18</sup> Uhumamure, Edokpayi, and Shale, “Occupational Health Risk of Waste Pickers: A Case Study of Northern Region of South Africa,” August 30, 2021; Ditema, “The Prevalence of Occupational Injuries among Waste Pickers in Landfill Sites: A Johannesburg Case Study”; Tshivhase et al., “Occupational Health and Safety Hazards among Solid Waste Handlers at a Selected Municipality South Africa.”

<sup>19</sup> Schenck et al., “The Management of South Africa’s Landfills and Waste Pickers on Them: Impacting Lives and Livelihoods.”

<sup>20</sup> Phiwayinkosi Gumede and Dumile Gumede, “Air Quality and Health Risks of Residents Living near a Landfill Site in Durban, South Africa,” *Journal of Public Health in Africa* 16, no. 1 (May 31, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.4102/jphia.v16i1.1274>.

<sup>21</sup> Usha Rani et al., “Informal Urban Livelihoods And Environmental Inequality: Occupational Health Risks Among Waste Pickers In Ghaziabad, India,” *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites* 61, no. 3 (September 30, 2025): 1859–74, <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.61344-1554>.

<sup>22</sup> Schenck et al., “The Management of South Africa’s Landfills and Waste Pickers on Them: Impacting Lives and Livelihoods”; Mudavanhu, “An Analysis of Livelihood of Landfill Waste Pickers in South Africa.”

<sup>23</sup> Koroma, Scott, and Esson, “Informal Waste Pickers in Africa: Social Reproduction, Marginalisation and Sustainability.”

otherwise collapse under municipal strain.<sup>24</sup> However, while existing literature engages with the lived realities of waste pickers in hazardous landfill environments, such accounts are often fragmented and not always sufficiently integrated into broader theoretical framings of risk. Consequently, their contributions are often emphasised in predominantly economic and environmental terms. Therefore, this study extends the existing body of knowledge by more explicitly conceptualising landfills as “risk society” spaces, and by foregrounding the lived experiences of waste pickers as embedded within structurally produced environmental, occupational, and social risks that are simultaneously systemic and intersectional in nature.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is underpinned by Beck’s Risk Society Theory, which is particularly appropriate for studying the experiences of landfill waste pickers (LWP).<sup>25</sup> Risk Society Theory offers a framework to understand the complexities and uncertainties faced by vulnerable populations, such as waste pickers, within a broader societal context. Beck argues that contemporary society is increasingly preoccupied with risks, especially those resulting from human activities. Landfill waste pickers operate in hazardous conditions that threaten their health, safety, and the environment. By employing risk society theory, this study frames these risks not as individual concerns but as systemic issues arising from larger social and economic processes.<sup>26</sup> From a socio-ecological perspective, LWPs are affected by risks not only at the landfill sites but also by broader economic challenges that hinder their ability to support their families.<sup>27</sup> According to Risk Society Theory, these challenges result from structural economic processes that disadvantage LWPs. Municipalities often do not recognise the contributions of LWPs to environmental and waste management, exposing them to further risks in their pursuit of livelihood. This pursuit, driven by the need to improve living standards and build resilience, places them in precarious situations. Beck’s theory emphasises that risks are not evenly distributed; marginalised individuals frequently bear the brunt of adverse consequences. Landfill waste pickers, often from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are disproportionately exposed to hazards such as toxic substances and inadequate protective measures. Risk Society Theory helps in understanding how these inequities are produced and sustained, providing a comprehensive lens in analysing the systemic factors impacting the lives of landfill waste pickers.

## METHODOLOGY

### Study area

The study was conducted in East London, located within the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The specific research site was the East London Landfill, formally known as the East London Regional Waste Disposal Site (ELRWDS) or colloquially referred to as Roundhill. This site is situated approximately 28 kilometres east-northeast of East London and 3.5 kilometres west of the town of Berlin, positioned between the R102 and N2 national routes. The landfill occupies the area formerly known as the Roundhill farm and falls under the jurisdiction of the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality.

The study was a two-phased study that, in its conception, applied a mixed-methods sequential explanatory research design, which allows the conduct of quantitative data first to develop a socioeconomic profile of landfill waste pickers and subsequently followed by the qualitative individual interviews in phase 2 with the landfill waste pickers.<sup>28</sup> This article reports exclusively on the qualitative interview findings generated after the collection and analysis of quantitative data. This qualitative phase was deliberately undertaken to deepen and extend insights derived from the initial quantitative phase of the study, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

<sup>24</sup> Olivia Loots and Palisa G. Ntsala, “Resisting Disposability: Survivalist Entrepreneurs in South Africa’s Informal Recycling Sector,” *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 20, no. 1 (July 11, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v20i1.1455>.

<sup>25</sup> Beck Ulrich, *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> Abbas Jong, “World Risk Society and Constructing Cosmopolitan Realities: A Bourdieusian Critique of Risk Society,” *Frontiers in Sociology* 7 (April 29, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2022.797321>.

<sup>27</sup> Schenck et al., “The Management of South Africa’s Landfills and Waste Pickers on Them: Impacting Lives and Livelihoods.”

<sup>28</sup> John W. Creswell, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. (New Jersey: Pearson Education International, 2011).

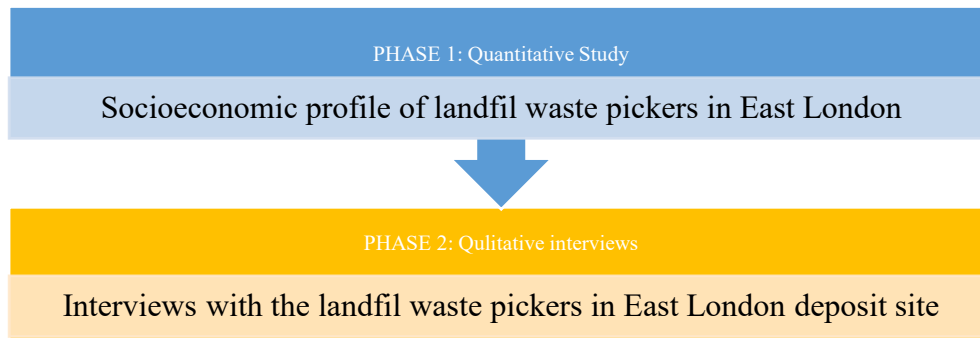


Figure 1: A two-phased mixed-method research approach was used in this study, with the present study focusing on Phase 2

In the current Phase 2 that is being reported on, 12 participants who took part in the interviews were selected through convenience sampling, which means that participants were selected based on their availability because their work does not allow them to wait a long time for a process of interviews as they must receive trucks that come at the landfill to dispose waste material and they would miss an opportunity to have access to waste material that has more value. The LWP were also assured that the process would not take away their opportunity to access trucks as quickly as possible. It was explained to them that if an opportunity arises, the interview will be paused. During the research, semi-structured individual interviews and observations in which both the interview and observation guides were developed were used. Observations were used to collect data concerning the daily activities of the landfill waste pickers on the landfill site. According to Fouche et al., observations are important in qualitative research because they provide rich, contextually embedded data that improve the validity, trustworthiness, and depth of understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.<sup>29</sup> Each interview lasted no more than 45 minutes. With the permission of the LWP, interviews were audio-recorded. Data collection continued until saturation with participant 12, after which no further interviews were conducted. The research was carried out with strict adherence to approved ethical standards.<sup>30</sup> Among the key ethical principles observed was obtaining informed consent before conducting interviews, including those in the first phase of the study. All information shared by participants was treated with strict confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used in reporting to protect their identities. Participants were also informed that the findings would be disseminated in a journal article, that their names would not be revealed, and that their reflections would be presented accurately, without distortion.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Table 1 below provides a summary of the demographic features of the respondents in the study that was conducted among LWP in East London disposal site. This summary is important to get an idea of who the waste pickers are in East London.

**Table 1. Summary of the demographic profile of the landfill waste pickers in East London disposal site, phase 1(2023)**

FEATURE	
Race	100% Black African
Gender	85% females and 15% males
Age	Average 39 years of age
Marital status	The majority of participants were single, only 5% married, while the rest were cohabiting with partners.
School education	Most attended primary school

<sup>29</sup> C. B. Fouche, H. Strydom, and W. J. H. Roestenburg, *Research at Grass Roots: For the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*, 5th ed. (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Fouche, Strydom, and Roestenburg, *Research at Grass Roots: For the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*.

Country of origin	100% from South Africa
Province	100% from Eastern Cape
Income	Average, R452, 50
Number of dependants	Average = 4

Source: Research data

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 50 participants who completed the Phase 1 questionnaires. All participants (100%) identified as black African and originated from South Africa, specifically in the Eastern Cape Province. The majority were female (85%), while males constituted 15% of the sample. The average age of participants was 39 years. In terms of marital status, most of the participants were single, with only 5% married and the remainder cohabiting. Educationally, most had attended only primary school. The average monthly income among participants was R452.50, and the average number of dependants supported per participant was four.

The following section presents the researcher's observations at the landfill site, detailing the daily routines of waste pickers, on-site waste sorting, and the involvement of independent buyers. These activities are synthesised and illustrated as a cyclical process in Figure 2, highlighting the sequence from initiation to completion. The observations are presented as follows.

**The observations: Researcher’s reflection during the field study**

At the landfill site, the researcher observed a series of activities in which landfill waste pickers (LWPs) actively engage. Figure 2 presents a depiction of the daily processes observed at the East London landfill, illustrating how LWPs access and sort waste on-site. The cycle shown will be described in detail in the following, outlining the specific actions and interactions that occur at each stage.



Figure 2: Summary of the daily routine of landfill waste pickers at the East London disposal site. (Source: Author’s summary)

**Cycle Stage 1: Truck Arrival**

Stage 1 of the cycle involves the arrival of trucks at the landfill. For waste pickers, the truck represents a critical resource, since it delivers waste materials that they can access, sort, and sell. The arrival of trucks each day is a source of anticipation and hope for their daily livelihood. These trucks are from the municipality, independent waste disposal companies, and certain businesses authorised by the Buffalo City Municipality to deposit waste at the landfill. There is no fixed schedule for truck arrivals, as they occur intermittently throughout the week. However, waste pickers reported that Thursdays and

Saturdays generally see larger volumes of waste, and they pay particular attention to truck arrivals on these days. The arrival of trucks is illustrated in Figures 3 and 4.



Figure 3: A truck is offloading at the landfill site in East London  
(Source: Photograph by the author)

### Cycle Stage 2: Waste disposal at the East London landfill site

At this stage of the cycle, the arriving trucks are disposed of waste at the landfill. The waste itself constitutes the primary source of livelihood for landfill waste pickers, who view it not as refuse but as a valuable resource that can be sorted, sold, and converted into income to sustain their families. During field observations, the researcher noted that when a truck entered the landfill carrying waste materials, waste pickers would often run after it, some even clinging to or jumping onto the moving vehicle before it stopped. This behaviour illustrates the intensity of their dependence on waste disposal activities and the effort they invest in transforming discarded materials into opportunities for survival and livelihood. The researcher asked the participants about their prompt response to the arrival of trucks at the landfill site, to which they explained that:

*It helps to get into the truck easily, and you get good stuff to keep before others get it.... sometimes you get new phones, which you would not get if you do not jump fast (P7, male waste picker).*

*We have high hopes when we see a truck, and we do not pay attention to everything when we look at the truck because we are looking for something that we can find to sell for money (P4, male waste picker)*



Figure 4: Waste pickers at the landfill approaching a truck to offload waste  
(Source: Photograph by the author)

### Cycle stage 3: Sifting and sorting waste material

Once the waste materials are offloaded by trucks at the landfill site, waste pickers immediately begin sifting and sorting through the waste for items of potential value. This process enables them to identify and separate recyclable or saleable materials, such as copper and gold, which can be sold to independent buyers. Therefore, the sorting activity is essential, as it allows waste pickers to distinguish valuable items from less useful debris, thereby increasing their chances of obtaining a higher income. As depicted in Photo 3 below, this activity of sorting and sifting through waste materials is clearly observable.



Figure 5: Waste pickers sorting and sifting waste materials at the landfill site  
(Source: Photograph by the author)

### Cycle stage 4: Packaging waste material according to type

After sifting and sorting, waste pickers package the materials according to type; for instance, cans are bundled together, cardboard is stacked separately, and glass is collected in its own group. This work is typically carried out without the use of PPE, leaving waste pickers highly vulnerable to harm. Many handle the materials with their bare hands, posing serious health risks, as some of the waste may contain toxic substances capable of causing long-term damage. Consequently, this process frequently exposes them to cuts, injuries, and other occupational hazards, underscoring the unsafe and precarious nature of their work conditions.

### Cycle stage 5: Selling it to independent buyers

Photo 4 depicts an independent buyer waiting with a *bakkie* (as shown in the image) to purchase recyclable materials collected by landfill waste pickers. The materials typically collected include copper, plastics, cans, and cardboard, which are sold at varying prices determined by their weight in kilograms. Waste pickers use the money earned from these transactions to meet their basic needs, such as purchasing food. Independent buyers are usually located outside the East London disposal site and serve as intermediaries between waste pickers and BBCs. BBCs function as depots where individual waste collectors, reclaimers, and street pickers can sell recyclable materials.<sup>31</sup> In this context, landfill waste pickers lack direct access to BBCs, thus, independent buyers act as middlemen who transport the materials to these centres.

<sup>31</sup> Jacoba Viljoen, Derick Blaauw, and Catherina Schenck, "The Opportunities and Value-Adding Activities of Buy-Back Centres in South Africa's Recycling Industry: A Value Chain Analysis," *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit* 34, no. 3 (May 5, 2019): 294–315, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094219851491>.



Figure 6. Independent buyer waiting with a bakkie to purchase recyclable materials from landfill waste pickers (Source: Photograph by the author)

Figure 7 below illustrates the structured relationship within the recycling value chain, showing that landfill waste pickers collect recyclable materials but rely on independent buyers as intermediaries to access BBCs. Although waste pickers recognise that they receive lower prices through this arrangement and believe that they could earn more by selling directly to BBCs, their lack of transport and logistical capacity limits this possibility. Consequently, independent buyers occupy the intermediary position not because they enhance waste pickers’ income, but because they are the only feasible link between the landfill and BBCs.



Figure 7: Independent buyers served as intermediaries between the BBCs and the landfill waste pickers. (Source: Authors own depiction)

The themes that emerged from the interviews, which are discussed in more detail in the subsequent sections, are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2: Themes that emerged from the analysis of data**

Themes
Theme 1: Emotional impact of discovering deceased infants abandoned at the landfill
Theme 2: Health risks of infectious or poisonous dead animals
Theme 3: Lack of shelter and sleeping conditions at and around the landfill site
Theme 4: Lack of birth certificates prevents school attendance, leading to involvement in landfill waste picking
Theme 5: Food insecurity at the landfill site
Theme 6: Absence of identification documents among older waste pickers prevents access to social grants, forcing engagement in landfill waste picking

Source: Research data

### **Theme 1: Emotional impact of discovering deceased infants abandoned at the landfill**

In this study, participants reported that working around the landfill site exposes them to distressing and emotionally unsettling experiences. Several participants described experiencing deeply traumatic scenes, including the discovery of deceased infants discarded among the waste. Based on their perceptions, these tragic incidents may reflect broader social and economic struggles faced by mothers who, under extreme hardship, may resort to such actions. In particular, this experience was mainly shared by female waste pickers, who expressed profound emotional distress and moral discomfort after witnessing such events. They reflected that these encounters serve as painful reminders of the harsh realities surrounding their work, reinforcing their sense of struggle and emotional vulnerability.<sup>32</sup> The following quotations illustrate these experiences:

*Here we see dead bodies of children. It could be that the person had an unwanted pregnancy, and when they give birth, they come dump the dead body here, it affects us because we will get diseases (P1, female waste picker)*

*We see the dead bodies of young children here, which will make us sick (P 4, female participant)*

*It's painful here to see the dead bodies; it really breaks your heart every day. You can not help but think Eish! ... there is nothing good about this job at all... But we have no other choice because we need the money (P2 female waste picker)*

These findings suggest that waste pickers at the East London landfill experience occupational trauma resulting from repeated exposure to distressing and hazardous situations. Encounters such as discovering deceased infants among waste materials are not only emotionally devastating but also have profound implications for the mental health of those involved. Continuous exposure to such traumatic experiences can cause psychological distress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, ultimately disrupting an individual's overall sense of wellbeing and daily functioning. It is concerning that these workers, who are already socially and economically marginalised, are left to cope with such experiences without psychosocial support. Their emotional vulnerability may manifest in chronic stress and fatigue, further compromising their physical health and capacity to work productively. This finding echoes observations by Tshivhase et al. and Samson, who noted that informal waste pickers in South Africa frequently encounter conditions that erode their mental and physical health due to continuous exposure to unsafe environments and emotionally taxing experiences.<sup>33</sup>

### **Theme 2: Health risks from exposure to infectious or poisonous dead animals at the landfill site**

Uhunamure et al. observed that waste pickers at landfill sites face significant health risks due to the lack of PPE, which leaves them exposed to hazards such as inhalation of toxic fumes and other occupational

<sup>32</sup> Tshivhase et al., "Occupational Health and Safety Hazards among Solid Waste Handlers at a Selected Municipality South Africa."

<sup>33</sup> Tshivhase et al., "Occupational Health and Safety Hazards among Solid Waste Handlers at a Selected Municipality South Africa"; M Samson, "The Political Work of Waste Picker Integration," in *The Informal Economy Revisited: Examining the Past, Envisioning the Future*, ed. Martha Chen and Françoise Carré (London: Routledge, 2020).

dangers inherent in their work.<sup>34</sup> This aligns with Beck's Risk Society Theory, which conceptualizes modern environments, such as landfills, as sites of heightened exposure to systemic risks.<sup>35</sup> Another challenge frequently encountered by waste pickers is the noxious odour emanating from decomposing organic waste, including carcasses of dead animals.<sup>36</sup> Consistent with these observations, the present study found that waste pickers at the East London landfill site are exposed to significant health hazards resulting from offensive fumes generated when sorting through waste materials. The unpleasant odours contribute to an uncomfortable work environment, and frequent exposure can cause respiratory problems and other health complications. The presence of animal carcasses exacerbates these conditions by intensifying the odour and increasing the risk of inhaling potentially dangerous substances. The following participant expressions provide direct evidence of these hazards:

*When people's dogs die in their homes, they will cross the road and come throw them in this disposal site, which makes it dirty* (P3, male waste picker)

*We breathe badly because dead animals are dumped here when we work, so it stinks, our society is bad* (P8, male waste picker)

Participants in this study reported that exposure to hazardous animals and toxic fumes in landfills adversely affects their health in multiple ways, occasionally resulting in illness. They shared the following brief reflections: *"My hands are infected," "I had TB before, but now I am fine, I guess,"* and *"My legs get swollen."* These accounts illustrate the tangible impact of occupational hazards on their well-being. Often, waste pickers are compelled to leave the landfill to seek medical care in clinics located far from the site, a process they perceive as a loss of income and opportunity. Similarly, Ditema notes that waste pickers who experience such a hazardous exposure must attend medical facilities, confirming sentiments of the participants and underscoring the severity of health risks associated with landfill work.<sup>37</sup>

### **Theme 3: Lack of shelter and sleeping conditions at and around the landfill site**

The landfill waste pickers reported that they lack adequate shelter to protect themselves during the night. This observation is illustrated in Figure 8, taken at the East London landfill site, where a visibly self-constructed structure can be seen.



*Figure 8: East London landfill waste pickers in front of their shelter in the bushes next to the landfill disposal site. (Source: Photograph by the author)*

<sup>34</sup> Uhumamure, Edokpayi, and Shale, "Occupational Health Risk of Waste Pickers: A Case Study of Northern Region of South Africa," 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Ulrich, *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*.

<sup>36</sup> Uhumamure, Edokpayi, and Shale, "Occupational Health Risk of Waste Pickers: A Case Study of Northern Region of South Africa," August 30, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Ditema, "The Prevalence of Occupational Injuries among Waste Pickers in Landfill Sites: A Johannesburg Case Study."

This finding aligns with the study by Schenck et al., which examined the health risks faced by landfill waste pickers in South Africa.<sup>38</sup> Their research revealed that waste pickers typically lack proper sleeping facilities and often construct temporary shelters for protection. These improvised structures generally do not have access to basic water or sanitation, and the absence of such facilities, both at the landfill site and at the locations where waste pickers sleep, was found to significantly increase their vulnerability to health risks.

Similarly, in the present study, waste pickers at the East London landfill site reported sleeping either in nearby bushes or in self-constructed shelters within the landfill itself. These accounts reflect the precarious living conditions of waste pickers, highlighting not only their exposure to environmental hazards but also the broader socio-economic marginalisation that compels them to reside in unsafe and unsanitary environments. The sentiments provided by participants,

*I decided to stay here at the landfill... It is not an ideal place to live, but if I leave, I will miss the opportunity to collect waste materials, which arrive daily with the trucks for disposal (P8, male waste picker)*

*My brother, it is better for us to stay here. Sometimes valuable waste materials arrive, even gold. If you leave and are away for a while, other waste pickers may take the good items, and you will miss out. Therefore, it is better to remain here, my brother (P3, male waste picker)*

*To earn money for myself, I would much rather climb the mountain and stay here...if you want to lose money, it is by staying in your home and only coming to the landfill sporadically, whenever you feel like it (P10, male waste picker)*

In contrast, it was noteworthy that some participants, particularly older waste pickers, reported having houses in residential areas of East London, such as Mdantsane and Ziphunzane. Despite this, they maintain temporary structures at the landfill site to ensure proximity to waste disposal points, allowing them to access materials when municipal trucks throw them away during weekdays and even on weekends. Once they have collected sufficient materials, these participants usually return home to rest. For some, residence at the landfill appears to be a temporary strategy driven by convenience and efficiency, whereas for others, it constitutes a more permanent arrangement. One participant illustrated this point, stating:

*As I sit here, I do have a house, but you cannot say... I am staying there because I have no other way...right now I am here... it is just that being here allows me to collect properly when the trucks come to dispose of waste at the landfill. If I were far away, I would miss valuable items, which would cost me less money. Come, let me show you the structure I built for myself here by wood, which I covered with plastic (P5, male waste picker)*

The following temporary structure, shown in Figure 9, is the one that the landfill waste picker demonstrated to the researcher.

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<sup>38</sup> Schenck et al., "The Management of South Africa's Landfills and Waste Pickers on Them: Impacting Lives and Livelihoods."



Figure 9. Temporary shelter built by a waste picker at the East London landfill site  
(Source: Photograph by the author)

#### **Theme 4: Lack of birth certificates prevents school attendance, leading to involvement in landfill waste picking**

Figure 8 visibly depicts children, estimated to be between the ages of 14 and 20, standing in front of a self-made provisional structure within the East London landfill site. This image provides compelling visual evidence that children are actively involved in waste collection activities at the site. One of the study participants confirmed that many waste pickers begin to participate in this work at a young age as a means of survival. A key structural issue underlying this worrying reality is the lack of birth registration and identity documentation, which prevents these children from accessing formal education. Possession of a birth certificate is a prerequisite for school enrolment; without it, many are excluded from the education system and consequently resort to waste collection to survive. As one participant explained:

*I am 14 years old, big brother. I help my parents when I can because I don't have a birth certificate to go to school. My mother never did it for me (P11, young male waste picker)*

This account highlights a broader pattern of parental neglect or inability to register children's births at local Home Affairs offices, often due to unstable living conditions or lack of resources. The absence of official documentation severely restricts access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and formal employment. Consequently, many undocumented children are forced to engage in hazardous work, such as picking up garbage, as a means of survival.

Another participant elaborated on the instability that contributes to this problem, stating that their parent "had to move from one place to another because she had no permanent accommodation and lost her things that way" (P6, male LWP). Older waste pickers echoed similar experiences, noting that frequent displacement and lack of shelter often result in the loss of identity documents [see theme 6]. This not only prevents them from accessing social grants but also excludes them from broader welfare programmes and opportunities for upward social mobility.

#### **Theme 5: Food insecurity among waste pickers at the landfill site**

The findings of this study reveal that participants experience acute food insecurity while working at the landfill site. They consistently reported a lack of regular access to food during the day, which not only undermines their physical well-being but also compromises their ability to sustain themselves throughout their work. Many participants indicated that they suffer from persistent hunger and have very limited means of securing food. Due to their precarious economic circumstances, they often lack money to purchase meals and are consequently compelled to consume whatever is available within the landfill.

This includes discarded and expired food items, which pose serious health risks and exacerbate their already vulnerable living conditions.

*Sometimes a day ends without eating, and it is difficult to even work when you are hungry (P2, female waste picker)*

*I cannot eat, so I think it is better if I eat what I got here at the landfill because sometimes it is better to see if it is not too expired (P8, male waste picker)*

*We share food when one of us has it, especially bread, which we break for each other (P9, male waste picker)*

These findings are consistent with the observations by Mudavanhu in a study conducted on landfill sites in the Western Cape province of South Africa.<sup>39</sup> That study similarly highlighted that food is consistently inaccessible to waste pickers at landfill sites, reinforcing the notion that food insecurity is a structural and widespread challenge within this context. The accounts provided by participants in the present study align with such literature, underscoring the intersection between poverty, marginalisation, and health risks in the lived experiences of waste pickers.

An observation made by the researcher at the East London landfill site revealed an interesting paradox. While waste pickers consistently reported that they had no access to food during their work hours, a woman was present at the site selling them cooked meals. Once the waste pickers sold the materials they had collected to independent buyers, they used a portion of their earnings to purchase food from this vendor. This highlights not only the daily struggle of waste pickers to secure food, but also how the landfill has evolved into a broader hub of informal economic activity.

The presence of food vendors within the landfill environment demonstrates how survival strategies intersect within the informal economy. Waste pickers, though marginalised and economically vulnerable, form part of a value chain that generates income not only for themselves but also for secondary actors, such as food traders. The food seller, in this case, capitalises on the demand created by hunger at the landfill, turning the site into a micro-marketplace. This duality illustrates both the resilience and exploitation embedded in informal economic exchanges: on one hand, food vendors provide a necessary service by addressing an immediate need; on the other, waste pickers must spend their meagre earnings on basic sustenance, perpetuating a cycle of economic precarity.

The picture below shows the makeshift kitchen, representing how landfill becomes more than a waste recovery; it also serves as a contested space of informal trade, survival, and economic interdependence.



*Figure 10: Informal food trading at the landfill site  
(Source: Photograph by the author)*

<sup>39</sup> Mudavanhu, "An Analysis of Livelihood of Landfill Waste Pickers in South Africa."

### **Theme 6: Absence of identification documents among older waste pickers prevents access to social grants, forcing engagement in landfill waste picking**

The participants expressed that they had lost their identification documents, which presents a critical challenge. Without valid identification, they cannot access social security income that could otherwise reduce their dependence on landfill work or at least provide a reliable source of livelihood. This underscores how the absence of official identification documents creates a significant barrier to accessing social protection in South Africa. A comparable finding is evident in the study by Xweso, Schenck and Blaauw on day labourers in East London, who operate within the informal economy.<sup>40</sup> The study underscores that the absence of identity documents constitutes a significant structural barrier, preventing day labourers' access to formal employment opportunities and their ability to apply for social grants.

Older waste pickers, many of whom would ordinarily qualify for social grants such as the Old Age Pension, are effectively excluded from this safety net due to the loss or absence of identification, forcing their continued engagement in landfill waste picking as a survival strategy.

*I don't even know how I would get social grant because I lost my ID as I spend most of the time in the landfill (P2, female waste picker)*

*Since we choose to stay here at the landfill, I think the movement may have resulted in the loss of my ID, because of that I no longer qualify for social grants because I do not have ID (P12, female waste picker)*

The findings suggest that, within the South African context, identification documents function as gateways to essential rights and entitlements, including access to social grants, healthcare, and housing. The inability to replace lost documents, often due to poverty, bureaucratic inefficiencies, or social exclusion, pushes waste pickers further into informal survival strategies such as landfill scavenging. For older waste pickers, the absence of social security support requires continued engagement in physically demanding and hazardous work, long after they should have transitioned into retirement with the support of state-provided grants. These findings resonate strongly with broader discourses on informality and structural exclusion.<sup>41</sup> Waste pickers, positioned at the margins of the labour market, depend on landfill picking as a default livelihood strategy when excluded from formal welfare systems.<sup>42</sup> The lack of identification documents not only reflects administrative exclusion but also entrenches structural poverty, effectively locking marginalised groups out of formal avenues of survival and reinforcing their reliance on precarious forms of informal work. Moreover, the narratives reveal a profound form of social invisibility: without identification, older waste pickers are not only denied access to state support but also rendered "stateless" within their own country, unable to claim basic rights or recognition as citizens. This exclusion perpetuates their vulnerability and underscores the urgent need for interventions aimed at addressing documentation barriers and extending social protection to informal workers.

### **Implications on Social Policy and Advocacy through the Lens of Developmentalist Theory**

The findings of this study highlight deep structural inequalities that shape the lived realities of landfill waste pickers (LWPs) in East London. Their daily struggles as reflected in Beck's Risk Society theory, marked by health risks, food insecurity, emotional trauma, lack of documentation, and exclusion from social protection, reflect the persistence of poverty and systemic neglect within South Africa's social development landscape. Yet, from a DSW perspective, as articulated by Patel, these findings are not

<sup>40</sup> Mzukisi Xweso, Catherina Schenck, and Derick Blaauw, "'Will Wait for the Government Pension Here': Structural Factors Impacting on Day Labourers' Access to Employment in East London, South Africa," *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit* 36, no. 4 (June 3, 2021): 308–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02690942211036406>.

<sup>41</sup> Judith van Leeuwen and Ilham R.F. Surya, "Network Power and Exclusion of Informal Waste Pickers When Plastic Flows Change: A Case Study of Community Waste Banks in Klaten Municipality in Indonesia," *Marine Policy* 167 (September 2024): 106285, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106285>.

<sup>42</sup> Mudavanhu, "An Analysis of Livelihood of Landfill Waste Pickers in South Africa."

merely descriptive of deprivation, they are a call to action for transformative social work practice rooted in empowerment, inclusion, and social justice.<sup>43</sup>

Developmental Social Work envisions social welfare not as a safety net for the poor but as an investment in human capabilities and participatory citizenship.<sup>44</sup> It demands that social workers move beyond remedial interventions and advocate for structural change that improves livelihoods and social functioning. Within this framework, the plight of landfill waste pickers compels us to ask: What should social workers advocate for in the face of such deep-rooted marginalisation? Should we remain silent observers of human resilience in deprivation, or should we reimagine landfill sites as spaces of economic participation and social inclusion?

At the heart of the DSW approach lies the integration of economic and social policies to achieve sustainable human development.<sup>45</sup> In this regard, the experiences of landfill waste pickers underscore the urgent need to expand developmental welfare policies that recognise informal workers as legitimate contributors to local economies. These individuals are not mere waste pickers but active participants in the recycling value chain, contributing to environmental sustainability and waste reduction in ways that align with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).<sup>46</sup> However, they remain excluded from municipal planning, social security programmes, and occupational safety frameworks.

From a DSW perspective, this exclusion points to a failure of developmental governance, where local municipalities and social institutions have not fully operationalised inclusive growth policies. To address this gap, social workers must advocate for the integration of waste pickers into formal municipal waste management systems, ensuring their access to training, protective equipment, and income stability. Furthermore, policymakers must institutionalise recognition frameworks that legitimise the role of informal recyclers through cooperative models, thereby transforming precarious work into dignified livelihood opportunities.

Equally pressing is the lack of identification documents among young and old waste pickers, which excludes them from social grants, education, and healthcare. This structural invisibility contradicts the developmental vision of social justice and equity. How can a society claim to pursue inclusive development when its citizens remain undocumented and thus unrecognised? Social workers, guided by the DSW ethos of advocacy and empowerment, must therefore partner with the Department of Home Affairs and community-based organisations to facilitate mobile documentation drives.<sup>47</sup> This would not only enable access to social assistance but also restore citizenship and human dignity to those rendered invisible by bureaucratic neglect.

Moreover, the psychosocial impact of landfill work, including trauma from encountering deceased infants and hazardous waste, requires a shift from traditional welfare responses toward community-based, trauma-informed interventions. Patel's developmental model emphasises that social work must blend micro-level care with macro-level advocacy.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, social workers must collaborate with local health departments to provide on-site counselling, trauma debriefing, and preventive health education while simultaneously lobbying for improved working conditions and health surveillance systems.

Finally, the role of Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) in developmental partnerships cannot be overstated. Patel stresses that NPOs should not merely deliver services but actively engage in shaping

<sup>43</sup> Leila Patel, *Social Welfare and Social Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); L. Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> Norman Chivasa and Geoff Harris, "Enhancing Social Interventions by Informal Peace Committees in Zimbabwe: A Developmental Social Work Perspective," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 55, no. 2 (2019): 130–40.

<sup>45</sup> Leila Patel, *Social Welfare and Social Development*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); A. Lombard, "Developmental Social Work.," in *Theories for Decolonial Social Work Practice*, ed. A. van Breda and J. Sekudu (Cape Town: : Oxford University Press, 2019), 47–66.

<sup>46</sup> Evropi-Sofia Dalampira and Stefanos A. Nastis, "Mapping Sustainable Development Goals: A Network Analysis Framework," *Sustainable Development* 28, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 46–55, <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1964>.

<sup>47</sup> Patel, *Social Welfare and Social Development*, 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Leila Patel, "Developmental Social Policy, Social Welfare Services and the Non-profit Sector in South Africa," *Social Policy & Administration* 46, no. 6 (2012): 603–18.

social policy.<sup>49</sup> NPOs working in landfill settings can facilitate community mobilisation, cooperatives, and advocacy platforms through which waste pickers can articulate their needs, negotiate fair pricing, and demand safer working environments. Social workers, acting as facilitators of social change, can bridge these partnerships to ensure that interventions are sustainable, participatory, and contextually relevant.

In sum, applying the DSW framework transforms the issue of landfill waste picking from a problem of survival into an opportunity for inclusive local development.<sup>50</sup> It challenges social workers, policymakers, and community development practitioners to rethink waste not as an end-product of consumption, but as a pathway to human and environmental renewal, in which even those on society's margins are recognised as agents of change.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Enhancing psychosocial interventions for landfill waste pickers experiencing trauma owing to the context of their work:** Given the evidence of occupational trauma and emotional distress among waste pickers, it is recommended that municipalities, in collaboration with the Department of Health and the Department of Social Development, establish targeted psychosocial support programmes for informal waste workers operating at landfill sites. These interventions could include regular mental health screenings, trauma debriefing sessions, and access to counselling services facilitated by social workers or community health practitioners. Additionally, integrating waste pickers into formal occupational health and safety frameworks would ensure they receive continuous health education and emotional support. Providing such interventions not only addresses the psychological consequences of trauma exposure but also promotes holistic wellbeing and sustainable livelihoods among this vulnerable group.
- **Policy reform for inclusive social protection:** develop and implement policies that formally recognise informal workers, such as landfill waste pickers, as eligible for social grants. The Department of Home Affairs should establish streamlined and accessible processes for obtaining identification documents, which would allow waste pickers to access social protection benefits. Collaboration with the Department of Social Development (DSD) is essential to ensure that these processes are integrated into broader social welfare frameworks, thereby addressing structural exclusion and promoting economic participation.
- **Strengthening the role of Non-Profit organisations (NPOs):** enhance the capacity of NPOs to participate meaningfully in both service delivery and policy planning. Partnerships between government departments and NPOs should be fostered to ensure that interventions are contextually relevant, aligned with the lived realities of landfill communities, and designed to empower marginalised populations. Such collaborative approaches can strengthen the provision of social welfare services while informing evidence-based policy reform.
- **Community-based advocacy and empowerment:** social workers and community development professionals, in partnership with the Buffalo City Municipality, should implement regular empowerment workshops for landfill waste pickers to educate them on their rights, the process to obtain identification documents, and accessing social grants. These workshops should provide practical guidance, promote self-advocacy, and promote community participation. By building knowledge and skills, waste pickers can more effectively navigate bureaucratic processes and assert their rights within existing social protection frameworks. These workshops should be aligned with efforts to integrate waste pickers into official municipal waste management systems, as outlined in the Waste Picker Integration Guidelines authored by Samson et al. in partnership with the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries and the Department of Science and Innovation.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Patel, "Developmental Social Policy, Social Welfare Services and the Non-profit Sector in South Africa."

<sup>50</sup> Patel, *Social Welfare and Social Development*, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Melanie Samson, "The Political Work of Waste Picker Integration," in *The Informal Economy Revisited* (Routledge, 2020), 195–200.

- **Health and safety interventions:** introduce targeted health and safety programmes that address the occupational risks faced by landfill waste pickers. Although the establishment of permanent healthcare facilities on site may be challenging, the Department of Health could coordinate mobile clinics to visit the landfill on scheduled days, providing essential health services, screenings, and treatment. Such interventions acknowledge the vital role of waste pickers in municipal waste management and recognise their contribution to public services, ensuring that they are treated with care and dignity. In addition, the provision of personal protective equipment and education on safe working practices can further reduce health risks associated with landfill work.

## CONCLUSION

The truth of this study is that landfill waste pickers in East London live and work within harsh, dehumanising conditions that expose the deep cracks in South Africa's social and developmental systems. Although their daily labour supports recycling processes and contributes significantly to environmental sustainability, their lives remain defined by exclusion, exploitation, and invisibility within formal economic and social structures. The study lays bare a painful contradiction: those who perform essential environmental work are denied the dignity, recognition, and protection afforded formal workers. Through the lens of Developmental Social Work, this truth demands confrontation; social workers and policymakers must move beyond rhetoric and take tangible steps to integrate these workers into the developmental framework. This means recognising waste pickers as active economic participants, not charity recipients, and ensuring their inclusion in social protection, municipal planning, and health systems. The truth, therefore, is that South Africa's developmental state remains incomplete if it continues to overlook those who "climb the mountain" daily in search of survival. Their resilience and labour are not symbols of poverty to be pitied, but of human strength that must be acknowledged, protected, and transformed into pathways for empowerment, equity, and genuine social development.

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### **Data availability statement**

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants, but may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### **ABOUT AUTHOR**

Dr. Mzukisi Xweso is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Social Work at North-West University and is affiliated with the Lifestyle Diseases Research Entity. His research primarily focuses on informal workers, particularly day labourers and waste pickers, with an emphasis on the socioeconomic challenges they encounter. His scholarly work seeks to advance social justice, economic inclusion and the empowerment of marginalised populations by bridging research and practice to foster sustainable community transformation. More recently, his research trajectory has shifted towards exploring the lived experiences of female waste pickers, with particular attention to their caregiving responsibilities and the ways in which they provide care and support for their children within conditions of economic vulnerability.