Exploring the livelihood strategies of waste pickers: A case study in Paradyskloof

Many unemployed people have no other choice, but to venture into the informal economy. Millions of people around the world make a living by collecting, sorting, recycling and selling valuable waste materials. Although there are about 37 000 waste pickers in South Africa, little is currently known about them, how their livelihoods are constructed and the spatial extent of their informal practice. As South Africa currently lacks an ‘Integrated Waste Management Plan’, this research sought to understand how waste pickers could in future be incorporated effectively into a comprehensive waste management system, investigating the livelihood strategies of waste pickers in several case study areas in the Western Cape, South Africa - one situated in a metropolitan area and another in a small town. The research compared the practice of waste picking in the two case study sites, detailing how and what is collected, where it is sold, what income is derived from the waste, and what problems waste pickers encounter. In addition, the spatial extent of the informal practice of both groups was mapped. The study found that waste picking practices vary from place to place, with waste pickers scheduling weekly visits to different suburbs according to waste collection days. Although deriving relatively little income, the study found that if more formally managed, and with easier access to recycling collection points, waste picking could usefully be harnessed by local government in the waste management value chain.

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