

## Waste pickers play vital role in keeping environment clean



*More than 22 million people around the world earn a living as informal waste workers. Picture: Bhekikhaya Mabaso African News Agency (ANA)*

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**Durban – In order to encourage the recycling of waste and reduce the burden on landfills, many countries, including South Africa, have adopted the extended producer responsibility (EPR) initiative, which places the onus to manage the life cycle of nominated products past their disposal stage on producers.**

As the country continues to roll out compulsory EPR schemes in accordance with refined EPR regulations, the critical role of waste pickers cannot be overlooked or discarded.

According to the producer responsibility organisation' (PRO) circular energy spokesperson Patricia Schröder, waste pickers are key actors in the waste management ecosystem whose contribution should be fully supported by EPR processes.

Schröder said the greatest contribution of waste pickers is that their activities divert recyclable products away from landfills, where they would otherwise be lost.

Instead, she added, these materials are directed towards processing for economical reuse.

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“As a result, the work of the waste picker assists in mitigating climate change and improving the environment for their community.

“Their work also relieves municipalities of the burden of sorting and separating recyclables from waste internally, reducing their operating costs in the process.

“In addition, because waste reduction is a growing concern, the profession is a fertile channel for job creation.

“Waste pickers provide an essential service with hidden benefits we cannot afford to ignore,” said Schröder.

According to the International Alliance of Waste Pickers, a networking process for organisations that look into the interests of the waste pickers globally, more than 22 million people around the world earn a living as informal waste workers.

Yet, the organisation’s review of global EPR policies and practices suggests that EPR threatens these participants more than supports them.

“South Africa needs to ensure that its waste pickers are protected through formal, transparent programmes that fully integrate their services and provide fair compensation and incentives,” Schröder added.



The producer responsibility organisation’s (PRO), circular energy spokesperson Patricia Schröder said waste pickers play a key role in the waste management ecosystem, whose contribution should be fully supported by EPR processes. Picture: KZN Beach Clean Up

The following are 10 integration principles that are used as guidelines used to guarantee waste pickers interests:

- recognition, respect and redress of unequal relationships between pickers and beneficiaries of their services
- valuing waste pickers expertise and needs
- meaningful engagement through legitimate platforms
- using waste pickers' existing informal system as the basis for new formal recycling programmes and contracts
- increased diversion of recyclables from landfills through cost-effective means
- evidence-based programmes and policies
- providing an enabling environment at national, provincial and local levels
- improved income and working conditions
- fair compensation for services and savings.
- improved community and stakeholder perception of waste pickers as equal and active participants in the waste management process.

Schröder further said the recent amendments to the Regulation Regarding Extended Producer Responsibility also entrench the importance of waste pickers by providing a formal definition for the term, and including their participation in the definition of "collection".

She added that the successful implementation of EPR in South Africa demands that all stakeholders should benefit from the process and share in its ambitions.

"This means waste pickers must be recognised as integral members of the waste management community, and that any risk to them associated with EPR should be addressed promptly.

"Their participation in the EPR scheme is a significant step towards building an inclusive, sustainable waste management system in South Africa," Schröder stressed.

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