

Reclaimers Hit Hard by COVID-19 Lockdown

Sarah Mohale is a 59-year-old woman reclaimer of recyclable materials. She stays in Block XX in Soshanguve (in Tshwane, Gauteng). Sarah has been doing this job since 1998, and has 22 years of experience working as a reclaimer. She has raised eight kids with the money that she has earned as a reclaimer and four of them are now grown up (she raises only four young ones now). She started working at Onderstepoort landfill but last year it was closed by the municipality, and she had to move to Rankuwa landfill to work there.

This coronavirus pandemic has caused her a lot of pain. Because of the lockdown, Sarah has been forced to stop working and her four kids are now suffering. "This COVID-19 has sabotaged everything and messed with our livelihoods. Our families are suffering and scared, and hunger is striking hard in our homes. There's no food inside the house and the government is not allowing us (reclaimers) to work so that we can provide for our families and so I can continue to feed my kids. Even now the government promised us [reclaimers] food parcels but only some reclaimers got food, [they have] not come to our side."

Sarah is a member and representative of the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO), an organisation of reclaimers based in the Gauteng region. She is also one of the leaders in the Rankuwa, Ondersepoort, Mamelodi and Soshanguve (ROMS) recycling co-operative in the Tshwane region. "We were promised the food parcels but the government didn't come and workers were becoming divided because they thought we were playing games [with them]. They started swearing at me and the truth is that this pandemic is causing division in us workers. Even today I'm still getting calls and workers are saying if we don't get food why doesn't the government leave us so that we can go and work."

Sarah said: "as a reclaimer I'm asking the government to acknowledge us and the work that we are doing because that's what we have been making a living with and supporting our kids with." Reclaimers also play an important role in the waste management of all our communities, and provide a service to society that is even more important during the coronavirus pandemic.

Eva Mokoena is a reclaimer, and the Chairperson of the African Reclaimers Organisation.

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