

Sifiso Gumbi Calls for Recognition of Waste Pickers as Environmental Champions in TEDx Talk



Johannesburg, Gauteng Aug 26, 2026 ([IssueWire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - South African social entrepreneur and Urban Surfer founder highlights the people driving recycling from the ground up and calls for more inclusive solutions to waste management

Every day, thousands of waste pickers across South Africa collect recyclable materials from streets, homes, and landfills. Their work keeps valuable materials in circulation, reduces waste sent to landfill, and supports communities, yet many remain overlooked and undervalued.

In his TEDx talk, **Sifiso Gumbi**, a South African social entrepreneur and founder of **Urban Surfer**, calls for a different way of looking at waste pickers. Rather than seeing them as people struggling on the margins, Gumbi says they should be recognized as environmental champions who are already helping build a more sustainable and circular economy.

Watch the full TEDx Talk here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBX25gDrnSo>

Seeing the People Behind the Recycling

Gumbi's connection to waste picking is personal. Before becoming an entrepreneur and advocate for more inclusive recycling systems, he worked as a waste reclaimer himself.

Growing up in Soweto and raised by a single mother after losing his father at the age of nine, Gumbi learned early how to be resourceful. He sold sweets at school, worked at a local funeral parlor, helped with catering and gravesite preparation, and eventually discovered recycling.

What initially began as a way to earn money became a career and eventually a mission.

Gumbi started by offering to clean people's yards in exchange for scrap materials. The income helped him afford things he wanted as a young person, including sneakers and a smartphone. After finishing high school, he became a full-time reclaimer.

But the work also exposed him to the stigma surrounding waste pickers.

From Waste Reclaimer to Social Entrepreneur

Despite doing well academically and being well known in his community, Gumbi experienced what it was like to be treated as invisible and, at times, viewed as a vagrant or criminal simply because of the work he did.

That experience motivated him to change perceptions about waste reclaimers and demonstrate the value of their contribution to communities and the environment.

He became involved in community cleanups and worked with local structures to help people understand that waste picking was about more than earning an income. It was also contributing to environmental sustainability.

Gumbi eventually partnered with a local businessman to operate a buyback center, where he purchased recyclable materials from other waste pickers. Although his circumstances improved, he continued to see the same challenges facing other reclaimers.

They lacked recognition, resources, and a voice.

Turning Waste Into Opportunity

Gumbi later met two individuals who shared his vision of supporting informal reclaimers. Together, they established an organization focused on supporting and uplifting waste pickers.

The goal was to change the perception of waste from a symbol of struggle into a symbol of empowerment.

For Gumbi, every can, plastic container, and piece of paper collected represents more than a recyclable material. It represents an opportunity for both the material and the person collecting it to have a second chance.

Through his work, Gumbi and his organization have supported more than **1,000 reclaimers across South Africa**. Their initiatives have included training, collection trolleys, recycling hubs, and facilities where reclaimers can store, sort, and process recyclable materials.

One Million Kilograms Diverted From Landfill

Gumbi also highlights how technology and collaboration can strengthen informal recycling systems.

A digital platform launched by his organization to help waste pickers receive their waste-picking incentives had already contributed to the collection of **1 million kilograms of waste within its first three months**, according to Gumbi's TEDx talk.

For him, the figure represents more than a recycling milestone. It demonstrates what can happen when innovation and collaboration are combined with the knowledge and efforts of people already working on the ground.

The work also points toward a larger goal: moving closer to zero waste and creating a greener future.

Supporting the People Already Doing the Work

Gumbi argues that waste pickers are already a constant presence in many communities. They work through cold weather and rain, collecting materials that might otherwise end up in landfills.

He believes communities can do more to support them by providing better equipment, personal protective equipment, and tools that allow them to work more safely and efficiently.

Better resources could also enable waste pickers to collect larger volumes of recyclable material while improving their working conditions.

Rather than creating entirely new systems from scratch, Gumbi believes communities and decision makers should look at the people and solutions already operating on the ground.

Bringing Waste Pickers Into the Circular Economy

Gumbi's vision extends beyond households and consumers. He calls on decision makers, packaging manufacturers, retailers, and other industry stakeholders to work directly with reclaimers.

Waste pickers have firsthand knowledge of what materials have value, what can realistically be recycled, and what may simply be marketed as environmentally friendly without having a practical recycling pathway.

Their experience, Gumbi argues, should be part of conversations about packaging, recycling, and sustainability.

A ground-up approach can help connect existing community knowledge with formal systems, creating recycling solutions that are not only environmentally sustainable but also economically and socially inclusive.

"Let's Start Seeing Them"

At the heart of Gumbi's TEDx message is a simple call to action: **see the people who are already doing the work.**

He encourages members of the public to get to know their local waste pickers, understand what they do, and consider how they can offer support.

For governments, businesses, and industry leaders, his message is equally direct. Instead of overlooking informal reclaimers, bring them into the conversation and build solutions with them.

Gumbi believes that by supporting the people already contributing to recycling and waste recovery, communities can move closer to a future that is **sustainable, just, and circular.**

About Sifiso Gumbi

Sifiso Gumbi is a South African social entrepreneur and founder of **Urban Surfer**, a circular economy enterprise focused on building inclusive recycling systems.

With more than 13 years of experience in the waste sector, Gumbi began his journey as a waste reclaimer before developing innovative models that integrate informal reclaimers into structured, income-generating recycling networks.

Through Urban Surfer, he has led large-scale waste recovery initiatives and worked with municipalities, corporates, and industry partners to divert recyclable materials from landfill while creating sustainable livelihood opportunities.

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