

Sign up for our Newsletter (<https://surveys.trust.org>) ~~ABOUT THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION~~ (<http://www.trust.org/>), (https://trustorg.secure.force.com/members/members_login?flag=true).

Coronavirus (/coronavirus/) **NEWS** women (/womens-rights/) LGBT+ (/lgbt/) Climate (/climate/) Economies (/economies/) Technology (/technology/) Slavery (/trafficking/) Cities (/cities/) Land (/land/) More ▾

(/)

'How are we meant to eat?': A South African waste picker on life under lockdown

by [Kim Harrisberg \(/profile/?id=003D0000029sF0DIAU\)](/profile/?id=003D0000029sF0DIAU) | [@KimHarrisberg](https://twitter.com/KimHarrisberg) (<http://www.twitter.com/@KimHarrisberg>) | Thomson Reuters Foundation

Tuesday, 7 April 2020 10:45 GMT



'We have been asking the government for protective gear for a long time, even before the coronavirus. Now we have to find our own solutions.'

This is the first article in a series examining how coronavirus lockdowns are affecting vulnerable people around the world.

As told to Kim Harrisberg, Thomson Reuters Foundation South Africa correspondent.

JOHANNESBURG, April 7 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) – Across Africa, governments keen to modernise booming cities often view poor people making a living sifting through rubbish or hawking on the streets as a hindrance.

This has been an ongoing battle for South Africa's 90,000 informal waste reclaimers, who haul trolleys across the city to **collect tins, plastic and paper (<https://news.trust.org/item/20190530084326-pc8ak>)** from people's trash before separating, washing and selling the goods to buyback centres.

Coronavirus: our latest stories

([https://nam02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?](https://nam02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fnews.trust.org%2Fcoronavirus%2F&data=02%7)

url=https%3A%2F%2Fnews.trust.org%2Fcoronavirus%2F&data=02%7

Reclaimers recycle 80 to 90% of plastic and packaging in South Africa, saving authorities up to 750 million Rand (\$40 million) in landfill costs, the Pretoria-based Council for Scientific and Industrial Research estimates.

Under coronavirus lockdowns in South Africa, municipal waste collections have continued but the movements and livelihoods of the reclaimers have been frozen.

Luyanda Hlatshwayo, 35, is a waste reclaimer from Soweto township who has been recycling for nearly a decade.

This is his story:

"I have been a waste reclaimer since 2011. It is difficult work, but it puts food on the table. Since the lockdown, things have not been good for us. There was no consultation with the informal sector before the lockdown. How are we meant to eat?

People are even selling their shoes to buy bread.

I usually wake at three in the morning to begin my work and my body is used to that. This morning I woke at three a.m, opened the door, and just stood there.

We are used to working hard. By nine o'clock you can see the distress. People are desperately organising money to buy food in bulk. When we try and leave the building to recycle we get beaten by the army or police.



Waste picker Luyanda Hlatshwayo stands with his friend in an abandoned school where they live in Johannesburg, South Africa, 15 May 2019, Thomson Reuters Foundation/Kim Harrisberg

If I look around me I see groups of people burning fires to keep warm and cook their food in the abandoned soccer academy where we live in Newtown in Johannesburg.

Up to 80 children live in the building, where nearly 400 of us share two taps and eight toilets. There is no electricity. Numbers are growing every day as the city's homeless have nowhere to go. I anticipate a riot soon if people can't eat.

If a person is used to hard labor and you tell them they cannot work ... it disturbs them. You know, people get frustrated. These children are hungry. I'm locked up in a space that I'm used to, but I feel like I am a foreigner here.

We have been asking the government for protective gear for a long time, even before the coronavirus. Now we have to find our own solutions, and we are finding them.

Those that are still managing to work don't touch the recyclable materials for three days before they start washing it with the hopes that the virus doesn't stay on the goods.

We are trying to keep sanitizers in our pockets. Some are even using plastic bags on their hands as gloves because there aren't enough to go around.

But personally, I wouldn't advise reclaimers to risk their lives out there with this virus, or with the police for that matter.

We want to keep ourselves safe, keep ourselves alive.

We don't have electricity but we are trying to stay connected to the outside world, to get more information on our cell phones if we can charge them. We don't know the statistics. Is it getting better? Is it getting worse? We are scared.



Waste picker Luyanda Hlatshwayo goes through trash to find recyclable goods in Johannesburg, South Africa, 15 May 2019. Thomson Reuters Foundation/Kim Harrisberg

People who eat at tables will be ok. People who can afford to have prepared fridges full of food will be ok in the lockdown. You can't expect people in the informal sector to behave the same as the people that are different from them.

We survive on a hand-to-mouth system. One day of us not working disturbs our income. Imagine a two week lockdown?

Our only way to survive is to depend on alliances that we have built with communities. Some are calling and checking in on us and asking, "Are you ok?". Some leave food out by their bins hoping we will find it.

We just keep hoping that a car will drive in with lots of meliemeal (maize flour porridge). This is just one of the informal settlements in Johannesburg. There are guys under bridges, in fields, in parks that no one is worried about.

Now we know for sure, informal people are at the bottom of the food chain. We acknowledge that the government of South Africa does not recognise reclaimers.

But I have a message to other waste reclaimers around the world trying to survive this war:

It's not impossible to get recognition for your work. The most important recognition that you need to have is recognising yourself as important. Your work is important.

We may not see proper liberation for reclaimers in this lifetime but it will definitely come.

We hope to get out of this coronavirus victorious."

(\$1 = 18.8138 rand)

Any views expressed in this article are those of the interviewee and not of the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Related stories:

Money or liberty? No win for carers, cleaners in coronavirus crisis
(<https://news.trust.org/item/20200403092714-hb3li>)

Coronavirus: Africa braces for impact 'like nothing we have seen'
(<https://news.trust.org/item/20200406160051-t6vri/>)

Fears over handwashing in Africa to stem coronavirus seen as trigger for change (<https://news.trust.org/item/20200321062208-xzmyp>)

*Coronavirus is changing the world in unprecedented ways. Subscribe **here** (<https://nam02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fsurveys.trust.org%2Fs3%2FCoronavirus-daily-briefing&data=02%7C01%7CSonia.Elks%40thomsonreuters.com%7C47>) a daily briefing on how this global crisis is affecting cities, technology, approaches to climate change, and the lives of vulnerable people.*

(Reporting by Kim Harrisberg @kimharrisberg; Editing by Belinda Goldsmith. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's and LGBT+ rights, human trafficking, property rights, and climate change. Visit <http://news.trust.org> (<http://news.trust.org>))

THEMES

CORONAVIRUS & VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES (/SEARCH/?Q=&F_THEME=CVS-VUL)



EMAIL (MAILTO:@?SUBJECT='HOW ARE WE MEANT TO EAT?': A SOUTH AFRICAN WASTE PICKER ON LIFE UNDER LOCKDOWN&BODY=HTTP://NEWS.TRUST.ORG/ITEM/20200407102057-BCMYA/)

EXPLORE MORE **CORONAVIRUS NEWS** (/CORONAVIRUS/)

For Brazil's homeless, many risks, and now also the coronavirus

(/item/20200408132110-51i11)

Social groups urge mass debt relief for poor countries hit by virus crisis

(/item/20200407072808-mv6li)

ORIGINAL

H&M in talks to support Bangladesh workers as lockdowns hit livelihoods

(/item/20200407164321-l8w3r)

'Tip of the iceberg': Racing the clock to contain coronavirus in the world's slums

(/item/20200407152112-zs4mn)

Biometric IDs can be 'gamechanger' in coronavirus antibody tests, vaccine

by [Rina Chandran \(/profile/?id=003D000001yHhhwIAC\)](/profile/?id=003D000001yHhhwIAC) | [🐦 @rinachandran](https://twitter.com/rinachandran)
(<http://www.twitter.com/@rinachandran>) | Thomson Reuters Foundation

Wednesday, 8 April 2020 08:29 GMT



As authorities consider antibody tests and vaccines, biometric ID systems can help keep track in countries without ID systems

*Coronavirus is changing the world in unprecedented ways. Subscribe **here** (<https://nam02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fsurveys.trust.org%2Fs3%2FCoronavirus-daily-briefing&data=02%7C01%7CSonia.Elks%40thomsonreuters.com%7C47>) a daily briefing on how this global crisis is affecting cities, technology, approaches to climate change, and the lives of vulnerable people.*

By Rina Chandran

BANGKOK, April 8 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - As countries begin to lift coronavirus lockdowns, biometric identification can help verify those who have already had the infection, and ensure that the vulnerable get the vaccine when it is launched, health and technology experts said.

Confirmed cases of COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus, total more than 1.4 million, with about 82,000 deaths worldwide, according to a Reuters tally.

Coronavirus: our latest stories

([https://nam02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?](https://nam02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fnews.trust.org%2Fcoronavirus%2F&data=02%7)

url=https%3A%2F%2Fnews.trust.org%2Fcoronavirus%2F&data=02%7

China lifted a two-month lockdown

(<https://news.trust.org/item/20200408065455-56idj/>) in the epicentre of Wuhan on Wednesday, and authorities in Britain and elsewhere said they would begin antibody tests to see whether people had been infected, to allow them to return to work or travel.

A biometric ID system can keep a record of such people and those getting the vaccine, said Larry Dohrs, Southeast Asia head at iRespond, a Seattle-based nonprofit that launched its technology last month.

"We can biometrically identify the individual and tie them to the test results, as well as to a high security document. The person then has 'non-refutable' proof that they have immunity due to antibodies in their system," he said.

"It would be a very valuable credential," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. The nonprofit already provides biometric IDs for refugees and stateless people.

From disinfecting drones to talking robots and artificial intelligence to develop vaccines, **countries around the world**

(<https://news.trust.org/item/20200316140626-x791z/>) have fast-tracked **technology during the coronavirus outbreak**

(<https://news.trust.org/item/20200320105803-ztaq0/>).

Now, firms such as iRespond and Simprints - a UK-based nonprofit that develops biometric IDs for health and humanitarian use - are adapting their technology for the next steps.

More than 1 billion people worldwide have no way of proving their identity, according to the World Bank.

This will present a massive challenge for governments trying to ascertain who has received the vaccine, said Prashant Yadav, a senior fellow at the U.S.-based Center for Global Development.

"The initial COVID-19 vaccine supply will be limited, so it will be essential to verify each dose reaches a real patient. Corruption, leakage, and even accidental duplication waste precious supply and are deadly," he said.

"Biometric digital IDs can be a gamechanger. They can help governments target population segments e.g. healthcare professionals or elderly population, verify people who have received vaccination, and have a clear record," he said.

Digital identity systems are already in use in many countries, linking biometric data such as fingerprints and iris scans to a unique digital code, allowing for remote identification.

These can be leveraged for tracking vaccination too, Yadav said, although the vaccination infrastructure that is built around children will need to be retooled for adults.

Many biometric systems are also based on fingerprints, which can be a transmission risk for the coronavirus, so Simprints is developing a "touchless" technology that scans the face or the palm, said chief executive Toby Norman.

Such systems can also be abused by governments and private companies, according to digital rights groups which have raised **concerns over the risk of increased surveillance** (<https://news.trust.org/item/20200305002314-damsj>).

To prevent any abuse, there has to be certainty about what the data will be used for and for how long, and when it will be deleted, said Norman.

"National governments don't have a very good record of giving up new powers once a crisis has passed," he said.

"Technology we use for disease surveillance today should not become tools for state surveillance at a later date."

Related stories:

Digital IDs said to boost economies, but privacy is at risk (<https://news.trust.org/item/20190123185324-mk9et>)

Ten years on, India's biometric ID excludes homeless, transgender people (<https://news.trust.org/item/20191126093342-6g8sr>)

(Reporting by Rina Chandran @rinachandran; Editing by Zoe Tabary. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers the lives of people around the world who struggle to live freely or fairly. Visit <http://news.trust.org>)

*Our Standards: **The Thomson Reuters Trust Principles*** (<https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en/about-us/trust-principles.html>).



[CORONAVIRUS & TECHNOLOGY \(/SEARCH/?Q=&F_THEME=CVS-TEC\)](/SEARCH/?Q=&F_THEME=CVS-TEC)

[HEALTH AND DISEASE \(/SEARCH/?Q=&F_THEME=HUM-DIS\)](/SEARCH/?Q=&F_THEME=HUM-DIS)



**EMAIL (MAILTO:@?SUBJECT=BIOMETRIC IDS CAN BE 'GAMECHANGER' IN
CORONAVIRUS ANTIBODY TESTS,
VACCINE&BODY=HTTP://NEWS.TRUST.ORG/ITEM/20200408075036-9OKS1/)**

EXPLORE MORE **CORONAVIRUS NEWS**
[\(/CORONAVIRUS/\)](/CORONAVIRUS/)

EU to adopt unified policy on coronavirus mobile apps

(/item/20200408114952-etgc6)

ORIGINAL

To combat coronavirus, governments step up digital surveillance

(/item/20200327085805-zcpnk)

EU privacy watchdog calls for pan-European mobile app for virus tracking

(/item/20200406120951-v1mm0)

Google releases location data to show if coronavirus lockdowns working in 131 countries

(/item/20200403052140-h12wv)

About Thomson Reuters Foundation News

news.trust.org



(<http://www.trust.org/under-reported-stories/>)

Our global editorial team of about 55 journalists and more than 350 freelancers covers the lives of people around the world who struggle to live freely or fairly.

(<http://www.trust.org/under-reported-stories/>)

FIND OUT MORE

(<http://www.trust.org/under-reported-stories/>)

Newsletter sign up:

➤

[Terms and Conditions \(http://www.trust.org/terms-and-conditions/\)](http://www.trust.org/terms-and-conditions/)

[Privacy and Cookies \(http://www.trust.org/privacy-and-cookies/\)](http://www.trust.org/privacy-and-cookies/)

[Acceptable Use Policy \(http://www.trust.org/acceptable-use-policy/\)](http://www.trust.org/acceptable-use-policy/)

[Contact Us \(http://www.trust.org/about/\)](http://www.trust.org/about/)

[Trust Principles \(http://thomsonreuters.com/en/about-us/trust-principles.html\)](http://thomsonreuters.com/en/about-us/trust-principles.html)

Copyright © 2020 Thomson Reuters Foundation. Thomson Reuters Foundation is a charity registered in England and Wales (registration number: 1082139)