

# Organizing on the Streets: A Study of Reclaimers in the Streets of Cape Town

A summary based on the report by Koni Benson & Nandi Vanqa-Mgijima, International Labour Research & Information Group (ILRIG)

In late 2009, a group of researchers contracted by WIEGO conducted a study to learn more about the people who work as reclaimers in Cape Town. The researchers wanted to find out the following things:

- where reclaimers worked
- who worked as reclaimers
- why and how they worked
- how they saw their work
- challenges they faced
- how the recycling industry treated them.

The researchers also hoped to find out about organizations that helped reclaimers and about whether or not reclaimers themselves would like to learn more about the benefits of working collectively. This leaflet discusses what the researchers found and hopes to help reclaimers and the organizations that support them gain a better understanding of reclaimers, what challenges they face, and possibilities for change.



## Introduction

Reclaimers have long been a valuable but unrecognized part of the recycling and waste management industries in South Africa. Many different people, including elders trying to earn more than social security, mothers trying to feed their families, part-time workers trying to make rent money, and even children, begin reclaiming in order to make money needed to survive. Because of the worldwide economic crisis and large companies trying to save money, many more working poor people are losing their jobs in South Africa and are joining the informal urban workforce by doing work like reclaiming.

Reclaiming means to collect recyclable or re-usable materials from what other people have thrown out as waste. Re-usable materials such as clothing, household items or cloth can be used by the person who collects them, sold to others informally, or used to make new items to be sold. Recyclable items like iron, copper, aluminum, sheet metal, plastic, glass, appliances, cardboard, and paper, are sold to buy-back centres. The buy-back centres then sell them to larger recycling businesses that make new products out of them.

There are many words for reclaiming in Cape Town. A few of these words are recycling, mining, *minza* (trying to survive), *ukuzizamela* (trying for yourself),

*grab-grab*, work, waste picking, strolling, or *skarrelling* (always on the lookout for something).

Though people have always reclaimed, more are beginning to reclaim on a daily basis. Reclaimers are not paid a decent wage for their work, and they often work in dangerous and unhealthy places. However, cities and large businesses actually depend on them to help with waste and to supply recycled goods that lessen production costs. In other words, while the recycling industry makes quite a bit of money, and municipalities save money by not having to dispose of waste that is recycled, this money is not shared with reclaimers.

## Where reclaimers worked

The researchers looked at three areas where reclaimers worked in Cape Town. These were Salt River-Woodstock, Khayelitsha and Philippi-Gugulethu.

Salt River-Woodstock is an industrial area ringing the city centre. Because it is a train junction, people can come from all over the city to sell to its buy-back centres. Although it has a long history of poverty and overcrowding, recently it has been chosen as an “improvement” district. This means people and businesses with more money are moving into the area and making rents higher. People with less money no longer have places they can afford to live in. People living in shacks or buildings where they

can't pay rent are being moved out of the area. Many people live on the street. As one man said: "I used to work in the construction industry and we have built most of these buildings you see...but now I do not have a place to stay."

Khayelitsha is Cape Town's biggest township and is about 35 kilometres from the city's central business district. Most people here live below the poverty line. Their shelters include matchbox houses, low-cost RDP housing and shacks made from recycled materials. Because so many people here do not have jobs, they have begun to do other things to survive like reclaiming and garden projects.

Philippi-Gugulethu is one of South Africa's oldest townships. It is very close to Cape Town's airport. It is overcrowded and living conditions are very poor. Many informal collectives, community, church, and non-governmental organizations have formed here to help people.

While the researchers conducted surveys and interviews in each of the areas, they chose to focus in a more in-depth way on the Phillippi-Gugulethu area. Overall, the researchers conducted 75 interviews with buy-back centre owners, buy-back centre workers, individual reclaimers and reclaimers who worked as couples. In Philippi, the researchers also interviewed groups of women reclaimers and organized associations.

## How do reclaimers work?

### Men and women working differently

Men and women do different work as reclaimers. Most reclaimers in Cape Town are men. Men and boys tend to collect heavy, more industrial things like metal, tyres, copper, and steel. They push these items to buy-back centres in supermarket trolleys, self-made carts, horse-drawn carts or rubbish bins, or drive them in small trucks called "bakkies." This allows them to deliver more valuable things, so men tend to make more money than women, averaging R100 a day.

Women reclaim things like paper, plastics, clothing and glass bottles. Some women, especially in Khayelitsha, collect fabric that helps them in other projects like sewing. Most women, unless they are working with men, carry their items by hand. Sometimes they carry babies on their backs, and their loads are usually heavy. Women also may work fewer hours than men because they are expected to look after family and do housework. Because they spend less time collecting, collect less, and less valuable things, women make much less money than men.

## Why do people work as reclaimers?

People work as reclaimers for many reasons:

- they have been laid off from jobs
- they cannot find other work
- to make extra money on top of part time jobs
- to make money to feed their families
- to make extra money on top of social security pensions
- they do not qualify for social securities
- they have never had a formal job
- to find material to use in their own homes.

## Who works as reclaimers?

Though they are all generally very poor, many different kinds of people work as reclaimers:

- African and coloured South Africans, some white South Africans, and African migrants from the rest of the continent
- children as young as nine years old
- young and middle aged men
- women, particularly single mothers
- women who have brought their families from rural areas in hopes of education and better conditions
- elders as old as 80, both women and men

Women can make as little as R10 a day and average about R50 a day. They are also not allowed to go into some buy-back centres, but must wait for men to go in for them. No one could explain why this was so. Generally, male reclaimers seem to think women are the weaker sex and should only do certain jobs.

### Organizing their days

Most reclaimers plan their working days around municipal collections, weddings and *imigidis* (initiation ceremonies). Some reclaimers have daily streets, areas and routes, while others don't like the idea of sticking to one territory. Some reclaimers live in the areas they work, often on the street, and others will come in from other areas to Salt River-Woodstock because of higher prices there.

Reclaimers often work more hours than a formal worker in a day. Some work constantly throughout the day. Others work in the early mornings and then again in the evenings when formal workers return home from work. Some women and elderly reclaimers will collect bottles for two or more months and have the bottles picked up from their homes by community organizations, for which the reclaimers may receive up to R1000.

## Challenges reclaimers face

Reclaimers face very dangerous working conditions:

- health hazards
  - toxic and human waste
  - dead animals
  - spoiled food
  - broken glass
  - illnesses, like pneumonia, brought on by bad conditions
- weather
  - high heat
  - the rainy season
- violence
  - bodily assault such as stabbing due to territorial arguments and theft
  - rape
  - theft.

Living conditions are not much better than working conditions for most reclaimers:

- many reclaimers sleep on the street
- people with shelter may not have running water or proper toilets
- most face overcrowding and resulting disease
- hunger.

Some reclaimers also have addictions to drugs and alcohol:

- according to one reclaimer in Salt River-Woodstock, some community projects had been driven out because “there is a lot of trouble now...reclaimers are using drugs and sometimes they are very rude.”

Reclaimers also face harassment from many different people:

- police and private security firms
  - reclaimers are questioned and harassed almost daily for no clear reason
  - reclaimers are accused of stealing from their communities
  - police respond to calls from buy-back centres to stop reclaimers from hanging around centre entrances
- homeowners
  - reclaimers are sworn at or sometimes called “*bergies*” (loosely meaning beggars) or “*Mabuyaze*” (come back with nothing)
- city authorities
  - one reclaiming collective was forced out of their building by a city councillor
- other reclaimers
  - there is much suspicion, competition and even violence between reclaimers
- buy-back centre managers and owners
  - as one buy-back centre owners says, “I know them all so well, they sleep near here and drink. I have all sorts of names I call them. You’d call them “*bergies*” or vagrants but I won’t offend your pretty little ears by telling you what I call them when I’m cross”
  - owners will call police to stop reclaimers from hanging around the centres.

Half of reclaimers work alone, while the other half prefers to work in a couple or group. Girlfriends and boyfriends will sometimes work together. Groups are often informal, which means they don’t have set rules, and could include 4-10 people. These reclaimers collect together and pool their collections for greater earnings. Earnings are usually shared equally to avoid conflict. Elderly women in Khayelitsha even share their earnings with group members who are caring for others or are too sick to work on certain days. As one woman states: “We collect individually for our own needs – but we do also share the collection if one of us is not able to reach a mark up or has been ill.”

## How reclaimers see themselves

A few reclaimers do not see themselves as “workers,” or feel that they are “wasting time” while waiting for a real job. Some see it as work that helps them

top up their part time earnings. Most reclaimers, though, see themselves as workers. As one reclaimer, Marcus, said: “I am a worker because I go out every morning like any ordinary worker. I don’t say I go to *skarrel* but I go to work. It is honest living, therefore it is work.” Many others said they worked hard, were self-starters, and were doing honest work.

## How the recycling industry treats reclaimers

There are some differences between buy-back centres in terms of how much material they buy from reclaimers. Some centres in Salt River-Woodstock say they only buy a little from reclaimers and do most of their business with large steel and paper companies. Other centres say business with major companies has dropped off since the worldwide economic crisis of 2008, and the whole recycling industry has lost many formal jobs, but



they have seen many more people begin to reclaim. In both cases, buy-back centres say big businesses set the prices, and there is little room for bargaining with reclaimers. Buy-back centres do, however, bargain with big businesses for their own prices, so most reclaimers rightly think that buy-back centres make quite a bit of money at their expense.

Reclaimers are not seen as a real part of the “value chain” of recycling. As one buy-back centre owner says, he buys from “all people – plumbers, people from firms.” He does not include reclaimers on this list. In other words, reclaimers do very difficult and dangerous work at the beginning of the value chain, just like employees do. They provide the goods large businesses need to use to save costs and make money. However, reclaimers are not seen as workers or even as people in the industry, are not paid or treated well, or given health protections or social securities for this work.

Individually, reclaimers have little choice than to be treated this way. In order to sell to buy-back centres, they must have ID documents. If they do not have ID documents and form good relations with buy-back centres, the owners may allow them to sell anyway. If reclaimers get on the bad side of owners, then they cannot sell materials and make the money they need to survive.

## Possibilities for organizing

While there are some income-supporting projects like sewing, health and nutrition set up for reclaimers, there are few projects that organize around reclaiming. Instead, they reclaim as part of another project. One sewing group in Philippi, for example, reclaims textiles for the sewing projects. There are few formal organizations that focus on changing the working conditions of reclaimers, although many small, informal groups form to share work and earnings. While these small groups have already “self-organized,” they don’t have the time to work for better conditions and better bargaining at buy-back centres. They mostly need to collect enough materials to get decent earnings.

Reclaimers, however, have been an important part of at least two community organizations. One organization, Tsoga, formed to work together on projects like greening parks, food gardening, nursery care, sewing and glass recycling. Now reclaimers find themselves fighting with authorities to keep

Tsoga running. In Philippi, women reclaimers meet regularly to help run the SPCA’s Cart Horse Association, which aims to protect the cart-horses so often used in recycling from abuse.

Though there are few projects that help them directly, reclaimers are interested in the idea of cooperatives. They believe cooperatives would bring about the end of buy-back centres and “there could be greater opportunities if reclaimers could be organized.” Many people were interested in how this work was organized in other parts of the world and ways work could be changed to help them.

As one man, Marcus said: “I wish all the reclaimers can come together, start co-operation and teach each other or share skills so that they can have a better future. I do not want to die waste picking.”

## Conclusion

Perhaps the most important question to ask is: do people want to organize around reclaiming? People want job security and a better life, but, like Marcus, do not want to die as reclaimers. Given the choice, most reclaimers interviewed in Cape Town would like to do something else. Any organizing, then, would have to focus on the fact that it would change the daily grind of their lives and would help them gain steady work and shelter. Women may also be interested in organizing around the gender injustices they face in the industry. It may also be fruitful to organize around the idea of protecting reclaimers from bodily and police violence as sex workers and street vendors do. Another way to begin organizing would be to bring together reclaimers, buy-back centres workers and “bakkie” drivers. In other words, first efforts could focus on bringing together people whose jobs and interests overlap and who are interested in how to change the way labour and money is divided in the recycling industry. Then, they may find it easier to work collectively.

As more and more people are laid off from their formal jobs, the ideas of “work” and “workplace” will change even more. Greater amounts of people could face greater job insecurity, hunger and poor living conditions. Informal workers like reclaimers could help pave the way for others to learn how to organize and improve their working conditions and lives.

Access a pdf version of this and the original publication at: [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org) or [www.inclusivecities.org/toolbox.html](http://www.inclusivecities.org/toolbox.html)