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Reclaiming Reusable and Recyclable Materials in Africa

A Critical Review of English Language Literature

Melanie Samson



WIEGO Working Papers*

The global research-policy-action network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) Working Papers feature research that makes either an empirical or theoretical contribution to existing knowledge about the informal economy especially the working poor, their living and work environments and/or their organizations. Particular attention is paid to policy-relevant research including research that examines policy paradigms and practice. This series includes statistical profiles of informal employment and critical analysis of data collection and classification methods. Methodological issues and innovations, as well as suggestions for future research, are considered. All WIEGO Working Papers are peer reviewed by the WIEGO Research Team and/or external experts. The WIEGO Publication Series is coordinated by the WIEGO Research Team.

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About the Author:

Melanie Samson is WIEGO Waste Picker Programme Coordinator for Africa. She is also a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science, York University, and a visiting researcher at the Centre for Built and Environment Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.

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WIEGO Secretariat

Harvard Kennedy School,
79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138, USA
www.wiego.org

WIEGO Limited

521 Royal Exchange
Manchester, M2 7EN,
United Kingdom

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Introduction

The sight of people rummaging through rubbish bins is ubiquitous in many African cities. Yet, aside from the well-documented and widely celebrated case of the *zabbaleen* in Egypt, Africa does not generally feature within current international debates on people who extract useful materials from the waste stream. Although a significant amount of research has, in fact, been conducted on this topic, to date there has not been a systematic effort to bring this literature together in order to distil key insights regarding the African experience.¹ This paper seeks to redress this gap by reviewing literature on the reclamation of reusable and recyclable materials in Africa. It identifies key themes within the literature, critically reflects on the ways in which research has been conducted, and identifies priorities for future research.

This literature review was commissioned by the research and advocacy network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). Since 2006 WIEGO has been working to help strengthen organising and networking amongst workers in the informal economy who reclaim reusable and recyclable material from what others have discarded as waste. This literature review is intended to help map existing knowledge on what WIEGO refers to as 'waste picking' in Africa, and to inform WIEGO's initiatives in this area. The review identifies and engages with a broad range of themes within the literature related to organising and policy issues.²

Over 90 documents were initially sourced,³ 58 of which were deemed to be of direct relevance to the review.⁴ The earliest reference dates back to De Kock's 1986 study in which 'garbage picking' in Durban, South Africa is explored as part of broader shifts towards informal labour within the context of economic crisis (De Kock 1986). Although only two references, both by Tevera (Tevera 1993; Tevera 1994), were produced in the ensuing decade, a dozen were generated in the latter half of the 1990s. Since the turn of the 21st century there has been a blossoming of research on reclaiming of reusable and recyclable materials across the continent, with the bulk of the literature being produced in this period.

Of the 58 references reviewed, 19 focus on South Africa, 13 on Egypt, five on Nigeria, four on Kenya, three on Zimbabwe and two on Mozambique. Botswana, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Mali, Tanzania and Zambia are each addressed in one reference. Six references deal with more than one country on the continent. The references reviewed include books, book chapters, journal articles, conference papers, undergraduate and postgraduate theses, internet publications and unpublished papers and reports.⁵

Whilst there is clearly a stronger scholarly interest in issues related to reclaiming reusable and recyclable materials in some countries, the uneven focus of the literature must also be attributed to the fact that the literature search was confined to English-language references. As such, the review does not benefit from or draw on research written in Portuguese, French, Arabic and the numerous indigenous African languages spoken on the continent. Although the material includes studies that span the continent, there is a bias towards countries with English as the colonial language. Trends and themes identified must be qualified on this basis.

¹ Rogerson (2001) provides a useful, brief overview of reclaiming in Africa as part of his study of 'The Waste Sector and Informal Entrepreneurship in Developing Countries'.

² The review is also informed by the author's ongoing doctoral research on struggles over the recommodification of waste which theorises and addresses a number of the gaps identified here.

³ Regrettably a small number of documents of direct relevance to the review could not be obtained within the project's time frames and were therefore not included in the review.

⁴ The remainder of the references dealt with waste management issues more broadly, but did not include a focus on issues related to reclaiming reusable and recyclable materials.

⁵ The main literature search was conducted between February and April 2009 by Judith Sheir. Many thanks are due to Judith whose expertise as an Information Specialist proved invaluable in unearthing and sourcing this wide range of literature. Thanks also to Janet Cooper from the British Library of Development Studies, Ana Paola Cueva Navarro of WIEGO, and Sipiwe Mtshali who assisted in sourcing documents for the review.

After considering the terminology used to describe these activities, the main body of this paper critically engages with key themes and focal areas within the literature reviewed. These include: descriptive, empirical studies of reclaimer demographics and conditions; the uses of and markets for reclaimed materials; the relationship between the formal and informal economies; policy and legislation; and organising. Each theme is addressed in a separate section. It should, however, be noted that many of the themes and focal areas overlap, and that the arguments within one source frequently speak to a number of themes and focal areas. Within each section attention is paid to how authors writing about the theme address issues related to gender and race. The final section of the paper identifies key gaps within the literature reviewed and presents proposals regarding key areas for future research.

Terminology Employed and the Politics of Naming

The question of terminology is not simply of academic interest since terminology reflects and shapes attitudes and perceptions. A wide range of terms is employed within the literature reviewed to refer to people who extract materials from the waste stream. There is little consistency in the terminology employed. Some authors use different words to differentiate between people performing different tasks, while others use several words interchangeably. By far, the word ‘scavenger’ features most widely in the literature reviewed, being utilised in twenty-seven of the texts. Other terms employed include: ‘wastepicker’, ‘collector’, ‘reclaimer’, ‘salvager’, ‘recycler’, ‘informal sector collection worker’, ‘garbage picker’, ‘picker’, ‘cart pusher’ and ‘waste harvester’. Even more remarkable than the sheer number of terms employed is the fact that, other than a few notable exceptions (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) 2004; Mwanzia 2007; Myllylä 2001; Samson 2008b), the authors neither explain nor theorise their choice of terminology.

Although the term ‘scavenger’ is widely employed in the literature reviewed, a number of authors (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) 2004; Mwanzia 2007; Samson 2008a, 2008b) reject it as derogatory and problematic. Mwanzia (2007) eloquently captures its inappropriateness, arguing that people who perform this work “are not scavengers because they are human beings and not animals. It’s the animals and some birds which scavenge for food from dumped refuse – dogs, pigs, goats, cattle and various birds like Marabou storks” (Mwanzia 2007, 1). Samson (2008a, 2008b) notes that reclaimers in Metsimaholo, South Africa were extremely offended that municipal officials called them scavengers, and the Legal Resources Centre (2004) observes that a judge cited as derogatory the Johannesburg Pikitup waste management company’s use of the term ‘scavenger’ in his ruling against the city’s treatment of reclaimers.

This study was commissioned by WIEGO as a review of literature on ‘waste picking’ in Africa. Following the example of the IPEC/ILO report (which critiques the IPEC/ILO’s use of the term ‘scavenger’ and proposes alternative language), it is important to reflect on the terminology employed by WIEGO before uncritically utilising it in the remainder of the review. WIEGO uses the term ‘*catador de materiais recicláveis*’ (collector of recyclable materials) or ‘*catador*’ (collector) for short in Portuguese and ‘*reciclador*’ (recycler) in Spanish. Both of these terms focus on the labour of recycling and how the work performed fits into the recycling chain. However, WIEGO currently uses the term ‘waste picker’ in English.⁶ As Samson notes, “[a]lthough the commonly used term ‘waste picker’ is not necessarily derogatory it does not capture the nature or importance of the labour being performed” (Samson 2008b, 16). Rather, it creates the image of someone randomly picking through garbage and does not provide any insight into what is done with the materials that are retrieved. The same can be said of terms such as ‘garbage picker’, ‘picker’, ‘collector’, ‘waste collector’, ‘cardboard collector’, ‘waste harvester’ and ‘cart pusher’. As the literature review below attests,

⁶ Initially WIEGO used the term ‘waste collector’ in its programme area. However, the steering committee for the First World Conference of Waste Pickers, held in Bogotá, Colombia in March 2008, agreed on the terms ‘waste picker’, ‘reciclador’ and ‘catador’. WIEGO has subsequently employed the term ‘waste picker’.

the word 'recycler' is "too narrow as not all goods salvaged are recycled" (Samson 2008b, 16). Mwanzia implicitly motivates for the word 'salvager', arguing that it is "a name synonymous with their mode of deriving their livelihoods" (Mwanzia 2007, 1). Although the term 'salvage' emphasises the act of retrieving useful materials that have been mixed up with garbage, it implies that these are pre-existing goods which are simply being 'saved' from loss or destruction. Arguably the term 'reclaimer' is more accurate as, "it emphasises that through their labour people are reclaiming items cast aside by others, and are also revivifying dead commodities and reclaiming the value inherent within them" (Samson 2008b, 16-17). Crucial here is that the reclaimed value may vary significantly from that which was imputed to it by its initial owner, as reclaimed materials may be used in novel and different ways from that for which they were originally intended. The term 'reclaimer' therefore indicates that the person is involved in pro-active, creative activities.

This review therefore uses the term 'reclaimer of re-usable and recyclable material' or 'reclaimer' in short to refer to the people who are the focus of the study. The importance of future studies being attentive to the words that reclaimers use to describe themselves, and of developing concepts which are grounded within and illuminate particular contexts, must be emphasised.

Descriptive, Empirical Studies of Reclaimer Demographics and Conditions

A significant strand within the literature reviewed is comprised of empirical studies of reclaimer demographics and working conditions at particular sites. Twenty-one such studies were published/released between 1993 and 2009. Most of these studies focus specifically on presenting empirical information. However, some include details on demographics and working conditions as part of studies that interrogate and theorise a broader range of issues related to reclaiming. The studies reviewed span fourteen cities in Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the key features of these studies.

Empirical Studies of Reclaimer Demographics and Conditions

Author	Date	City	Country	Sample Size	Brief Description
De Kock	1986	Durban	South Africa	96	Surveyed 96 reclaimers at 3 dumps in Durban as part of a study that critiques the ability of the informal sector to generate secure livelihoods.
Tevera	1993	Harare	Zimbabwe	53	Surveyed 53 of the 65 reclaimers at the Teviotdale dump to explore reclaiming as a survival strategy in response to urban poverty.
Tevera	1994	Gaborone	Botswana	75	Surveyed 75 reclaimers out of an estimated population of 150-250 permanent reclaimers (400-600 including irregulars) working at the Old Tlokweng Rd Dump to shed light on urban poverty.
Mutenga and Muyakwa	1999	Lusaka,	Zambia	204	Surveyed 204 reclaimers to explore reclaiming as a strategy to address solid waste problems and provide livelihoods. Clustered all townships in the city into 13 sectors and surveyed reclaimers working in the streets and one legal landfill in 5 of the sectors.
McLean	2000a	Durban	South Africa	20	Increasing numbers of reclaimers are working in residential areas of Durban. This study interviewed 20 street reclaimers in the Glenwood-Berea residential area.
McLean	2000b	Durban	South Africa	20	Within a context where increasing numbers of people are entering the informal economy this study provides profiles of 20 reclaimers who sell materials at a buyback centre in Durban's central business district.
Adeyemi, Olorunfemi and Adewoye	2001	Ilorin	Nigeria	250	Surveyed 250 randomly selected reclaimers to explore their role in recycling and argue that they should be formally integrated into recycling processes.
Domingos	2001	Maputo	Mozambique	49	Interviewed 49 reclaimers at the Hulene Landfill as part of a study exploring their socio-economic conditions and reclaiming activities at the landfill.
Bjerkli	2005	Addis Ababa	Ethiopia	63	Surveyed 63 <i>korales</i> (itinerant junk buyers) as part of a broader study exploring the organisation and actors in the informal plastics recovery system in Addis Ababa.
Mueller	2005	Durban	South Africa	10	Interviewed 10 female cardboard collectors as part of a value chain analysis of the waste management sector.
Mwanzia	2005	Nakuru	Kenya	38	Out of 130 reclaimers at the Gioto dump, 38 were surveyed for a baseline study of reclaimers at the dump. An additional 19 participated in focus groups.

Empirical Studies of Reclaimer Demographics and Conditions (continued)

Author	Date	City	Country	Sample Size	Brief Description
Mwanzia	2006	Nakuru	Kenya	117	Surveyed 117 of the estimated 200-300 reclaimers in the central business district and surrounding estates for a baseline study of street reclaimers in Nakuru.
Masocha	2006	Victoria Falls	Zimbabwe	13	Interviewed 13 reclaimers at 3 open dumps out of an estimated total of 100 as part of a study analysing the socio-economic benefits of reclaiming in Victoria Falls.
Langenhoven and Dysseel	2007	Cape Town	South Africa	27	Surveyed 27 reclaimers selling at buyback centres as part of a broader study of the potential of the recycling industry in Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town to sustain livelihoods of reclaimers and small entrepreneurs.
Ralfe	2007	Durban	South Africa	60	Interviewed 60 reclaimers at 3 buyback centres in Durban as part of a study of the socio-economic situation of reclaimers in the city.
Ngoepe	2007	Johannesburg	South Africa	9	Interviewed 9 reclaimers at Marie Louise landfill as part of a study of the working conditions of workers in the metal recycling value chain.
Dilata	2008	Johannesburg	South Africa	8	Interviewed 8 reclaimers at Marie Louise landfill as part of a study of the working conditions of workers in the paper recycling value chain.
Zoya	2008	Ekurhuleni	South Africa	?	This case study of the reclaimers at the Boksburg landfill was commissioned by the municipality. It focuses on the working conditions of the reclaimers and the activities of the group they have formed called <i>Masakhane</i> . The author does not provide details of the methodology used or number of interviews conducted.
Nzeadibe and Iwuoha	2008	Lagos	Nigeria	65	Surveyed 50 reclaimers at the Ojota landfill (2% of the estimated population) and 15 at the Solus/Abule-Egba dump (no estimate of population provided) to study informal recycling in Lagos and its contribution to livelihoods, the environment, industry and waste management.
Nzeadibe	2008	Enugu	Nigeria	24	Surveyed 24 of the estimated 80 male reclaimers at the landfill in Ugwuaji just outside Enugu as part of a study of the position of informal recycling in the planning and reform of waste management in the city of Enugu.
Visser and Theron	2009	Cape Town	South Africa	10	Interviewed 10 street reclaimers as part of a broader study looking at the inclusion/exclusion of informal workers (including externalised and casualised collection workers) in Cape Town's waste management strategy.

Key findings

Adeyemi, Olorunfemi and Adewoye (2001) and Ralfe (2007) note the difficulty in establishing the total population of reclaimers from which to select a sample, a problem likely confronted by most of the authors. None of the authors presents basic information such as error rates. For the most part the samples are small, at times including only a dozen reclaimers (but nevertheless presenting their findings as percentages). Only 6 studies surveyed either reasonably large numbers of reclaimers (Adeyemi, Olorunfemi and Adewoye 2001; de Kock 1985; Mutenga and Muyakwa 1999; Mwanzia 2006; Tevera 1994), or a significant proportion of the estimated total number of reclaimers (Tevera 1993). Most of the studies cannot, therefore, be taken as representative of the sites surveyed. None should be generalised to other sites, even within the same city. Caution should, therefore, be exercised when engaging with their findings. Taken together the studies do, however, provide insight into the diverse experiences of the reclaimers who were interviewed, and read in relation to one another the studies raise useful methodological and conceptual insights. The remainder of this section therefore presents the key findings, and the subsequent section explores the methodological issues that they help to surface.

Gender, gender division of labour and marital status

The empirical studies report a range of different situations with respect to the gender composition of the groups of reclaimers studied. In some instances the reclaimers were exclusively or primarily male (Adeyemi, Olorunfemi and Adewoye 2001; Bjerkli 2005; Masocha 2006; Mutenga and Muyakwa 1999; Mwanzia 2006; Ngoepe 2007; Nzeadibe 2008; Nzeadibe and Iwuoha 2008), in others they were fairly equally divided between men and women (De Kock 1986; Ralfe 2007; Tevera 1993; Zoya 2008), and in a few women far outnumbered men (Mueller 2005; Tevera 1994). Some authors report the existence of a gender division of labour. Mwanzia (2005) observes that men monopolised collection of more lucrative materials. De Kock (1986) reports similar findings, specifying that men focused on higher revenue-generating metal and planks. Mutenga and Muyakwa (1999) also found that metal collection was dominated by men, while in their case study women concentrated on glass.

Race, ethnicity, nationality and migration

Questions related to nationality, race and ethnicity receive less attention in the studies reviewed than gender. Three authors report on the nationality of the reclaimers. All of the reclaimers interviewed in Gaborone by Tevera (1994) were from Botswana. By contrast, almost a quarter of those he interviewed in Harare were foreign. Most had, however, been in Zimbabwe for 14 years or more and had migrated to the city from farms. Two out of ten reclaimers interviewed by Mueller (2005) in Durban, South Africa were from Lesotho.

Only two authors note the race of their respondents, which in both cases was African (Dilata 2008; Mueller 2005). Similarly, only two authors explored the ethnicity of the reclaimers that they studied. Both found a dominant ethnic group within their samples. Ralfe (2007) reports that more than half of her respondents were Zulu (the main ethnic group in the province where Durban is located), and the remainder were Xhosa and Sotho. Bjerkli (2005) observes that 39.7% of the korales she interviewed in Addis Ababa were Gurage, which was the same ethnic group that predominated amongst the wholesalers to whom they sold their goods. Although Mwanzia (2005, 2006) does not note which ethnic groups his respondents were from, he reports that tribalism in the allocation of casual jobs affected the ability of reclaimers to obtain other forms of employment. He also explains that many of the people in his sample migrated to Nakuru, Kenya and became reclaimers as they fled tribal clashes in rural areas.

A number of other authors also explored issues related to internal migration. They found that most of the reclaimers originally came from rural areas (Bjerkli 2005; De Kock 1986; McLean 2000a, 2000b; Mueller 2005; Mutenga and Muyakwa 1999; Mwanzia 2005, 2006; Nzeadibe 2008; Ralfe 2007; Tevera 1993, 1994). De Kock (1986), Ralfe (2007) and Tevera (1993, 1994) all report that, contrary to assumptions that reclaimers are recent urban migrants, the majority of those whom they interviewed had lived in the city for a number of years. Tevera (1993) concludes that this dispels arguments that reclaimers should be returned to rural areas.

Age

The studies that report on age use a number of different ways to break down age categories, making it difficult to compare the data. In more general terms, five studies found that the majority of reclaimers were below 28 years of age (Adeyemi, Olorunfemi and Adewoye 2001; Bjerkli 2005; De Kock 1986; Masocha 2006; Mwanzia 2006) whilst six (Dilata 2008; Mutenga and Muyakwa 1999; Mwanzia 2005; Ngoepe 2007; Tevera 1993; Tevera 1994) reported higher average ages.⁷ Of the empirical studies reviewed in this section, only De Kock (1986) reports on the presence of children working on the dumps. However, as discussed further below, Benjamin (2007) found reclaiming by children to be widespread on the dumps that she studied in South Africa, and a number of programmes have been established for child reclaimers in Egypt (Assaad and Bruce 1997; Iskandar 2007). The fact that the empirical studies did not investigate or report on child labour should not, therefore, be taken to mean that it is not occurring in the sites that were studied or the continent more generally.

Education

The studies reviewed also present a range of findings related to education. Six studies (De Kock 1986; Mueller 2005; Mwanzia 2005; Nzeadibe and Iwuoha 2008; Tevera 1993; Tevera 1994) report high levels of illiteracy and low average levels of formal education amongst their respondents. Eight studies (Adeyemi, Olorunfemi and Adewoye 2001; Bjerkli 2005; Dilata 2008; Masocha 2006; Mutenga and Muyakwa 1999; Mwanzia 2006; Ngoepe 2006; Ralfe 2007) report higher levels of education. Although these studies often found a layer of reclaimers with low levels of literacy and education, they report that on average reclaimers had at least finished primary school, and in some instances had finished secondary school. De Kock (1986), and Mutenga and Muyakwa (1999) note that the male reclaimers they surveyed had higher levels of education than the women. Mwanzia (2005) notes that the reclaimers working in the streets had higher levels of education than those working on the dump in Nakuru, Kenya. He does not explore why this is the case, although it may be related to the fact that on average they were younger than those at the dump. De Kock (1986) explicitly notes that amongst her respondents in Durban, South Africa, younger reclaimers had higher levels of education than their older counterparts.

Working hours, working and living conditions

A number of studies looked at the length of time that reclaimers have worked in the sector. As they use different ways to report this information it becomes difficult to compare the data. However, whilst some find that most reclaimers in their samples had worked for less than two years (De Kock 1986; McLean 2000a, 2000b; Tevera 1994), others found that the majority had worked for more than three years (Bjerkli 2005; Langenhove and Dyssel 2007; Dilata 2008) and in one case a large portion of those interviewed had been working for more than seven years (Tevera 1993).

A number of studies found that the majority of their respondents worked at least five days per week for a full working day (Bjerkli 2005; De Kock 1986; Mueller 2005; Mutenga and Muyakwa 1999; Ralfe 2007; Tevera 1993; Visser and Theron 2008). Others found wide variations in the hours worked by the reclaimers in their samples (Masocha 2006; Tevera 1994). Several authors note gender differences in hours worked. Tevera (1993) found that most of the 36% of his sample who worked less than four hours a day were women with young babies. Gender played out differently in De Kock's (1986) study, in which she observes that although women earned less than men, they worked longer hours.

The studies also record variations in how reclaimers access the dumps. Tevera's 1993 study of the dump in Harare found that only reclaimers who had been given identity cards by recycling companies could enter (Tevera 1993). However, in several of the dumps studied, reclaimers had relatively easy access to the sites, as they were unfenced and the municipality at least tolerated the presence of the reclaimers (De Kock 1986; Masocha 2006; Nzeadibe and Iwuoha 2008; Tevera 1994). In their study of Lusaka, Mutenga and Muyakwa (1999) found that the reclaimers were not harassed and had surprisingly good relations with officials at the dump. By contrast, De Kock (1986), McLean (2000b) and Nzeadibe and Iwuoha (2008) report that reclaimers felt that they were viewed with contempt and experienced repression.

⁷ Due to the way in which the information is presented in Masocha (2006), Nzeadibe and Iwuoha (2008), Ralfe (2007) and Zoya (2008) it is difficult to determine whether the majority of reclaimers were relatively young.

There is less diversity in the findings related to the working and living conditions of the reclaimers. Almost half of the studies note the considerable physical dangers and health risks associated with reclaiming work (Bjerkli 2005; Domingos 2001; Mueller 2005; Mutenga and Muyakwa 1999; Mwanzia 2005, 2006; Ngoepe 2008; Nzeadibe 2008; Zoya 2008). A number of authors (Masocha 2006; Mutenga and Muyakwa 1999; Mwanzia 2006; Tevera 1994; Visser and Theron 2008; Zoya 2008) also report that reclaimers faced problems related to housing and many lived in informal settlements or on the streets. In two instances reclaimers were reported to be living in shacks and/or caves on the dumps themselves (Mwanzia 2005; Nzeadibe and Iwuoha 2008).

Earnings

A number of studies present information on average earnings in local currencies. Of those that compare these averages to earnings in the relevant national economy, three found that reclaimers earned either below the average for unskilled work (Tevera 1993) or below the poverty line (Mwanzia 2005, 2006). However, four studies (Masocha 2006; Mutenga and Muyakwa 1999; Nzeadibe 2008; Tevera 1993) found that on average the reclaimers earned above the minimum wages for either domestic or unskilled workers. One study's findings were ambiguous, depending on whether minimum or maximum earnings were used, presumably highlighting that reclaimers were earning within a margin that fluctuates around the average local wage (Bjerkli 2005).

A small number of authors reflect on factors that affected earnings. Tevera (1993) notes that earnings varied seasonally as rain made paper weigh more (and hence presumably fetch a higher price), and at Christmas there was an increase in the amount of garbage produced and sent to the dump. McLean (2000a) observes that reclaimers with trolleys earned more than those without. Gender is also noted to be of relevance in several studies – De Kock (1986) and Tevera (1993) report that amongst the reclaimers they surveyed, men had higher incomes than women as they collected higher value materials, and Tevera (1993) further notes that younger, more agile men had higher incomes.

Analysis of the findings and methodological issues

As is clear from the preceding section, the studies reviewed present a range of findings related to the demographics and conditions of reclaimers in the sites that they studied. This should not be surprising, given that the studies were conducted in a number of different places over a considerable time span. The wide variation in results affirms that it is impossible to make generalised statements about 'reclaimers in Africa', or even about reclaimers in one country or one city. It is only through contextually specific, historical analysis of labour markets, gendered and racialised class relations, socio-economic conditions, approaches to governance and conceptualisations of waste, amongst a host of other issues relevant to each specific place, that we can gain insight into who reclaimers are, why they are doing the work of reclaiming and how this affects their lives and livelihood strategies. This type of nuanced insight is not only of academic interest, but is of crucial importance in the development of informed and relevant organising strategies and policies related to reclaiming.

Unfortunately, taken on their own terms, the individual studies do not achieve this goal due to the narrow ways in which they are framed. A few authors unpack some of their findings in order to explain how these situations emerged. For example, Mwanzia (2005) argues that the gender division of labour on the Nakuru dump in Kenya arose as young men use physical strength to monopolise more lucrative materials and presumably to enforce the informal rules that prohibit women from climbing trucks and salvaging waste from hotels before men do. Bjerkli (2005) explains that in order to work as a *korale* in Addis Ababa you either need to know a buyer or another *korale* who introduces you to a buyer. As ethnic ties influence these introductions, this results in an 'invisible ethnic segmentation' in the industry. Finally, in seeking to explain why most respondents in their study of Lusaka, Zambia had started working as reclaimers in the preceding five years, Mutenga and Muyakwa note that this was the same period in which economic reforms had negatively affected the poor.

Aside from these notable exceptions, the authors reviewed do not theorise the information which they present and instead simply present their findings as facts. However, such ‘facts’ will clearly change over time as conditions change. Facts related to reclaimers identified by researchers could be true today, but dramatically different a year from now. In addition to presenting statistical findings it would, therefore, be important for researchers to also explore the dynamics underpinning the production of these facts. By providing deeper insight into the structural forces at play and the social relations in the reclaiming sector, such studies would be invaluable in developing relevant and dynamic approaches to engaging with reclaimers.

An issue also emerges in the literature regarding how the authors frame their focus of analysis. For the most part they tend to treat their chosen sites in isolation and do not interrogate how the sites are related to, and affected by, policies, practices and social relations in other places and at other scales (such as the city, the province, the nation, the global). Tevera (1994) is unique in locating his study of the dump in Gaborone, Botswana within an analysis of how the broader international political economy affected demand for recyclables. Less than half of the studies⁸ provide information on, and analysis of, national and/or municipal policy and how this relates to reclaimers. It should be noted that, although some authors may have ignored questions of policy as there is no policy that deals explicitly with reclaimers, this silence itself would be important to document and interrogate.

There is also a tendency within these empirical studies to treat reclaimers as passive objects of study. McLean (2000a; 2000b), Mwanzia (2005; 2006), Ralfe (2007), Tevera (1994) and Zoya (2008) are surprisingly unique in having asked reclaimers how they addressed their problems and/or how they thought these problems could be resolved. Existing solutions included contributions by reclaimers in Ekurhuleni, South Africa to pay for security to guard their materials and a funeral scheme (Zoya 2008). Proposals for future interventions included formal recognition by residents and government (McLean 2000a, 2000b), assistance in accessing trolleys (McLean 2000a), provision of transport (Ralfe 2007), assistance in accessing national identification documents (Mwanzia 2006), education and training (Mwanzia 2006), provision of land (Mwanzia 2005), and provision of alternative jobs (Ralfe 2007; Tevera 1994). Only eight authors (Domingos 2001; McLean 2000b; Mueller 2005; Mutenga and Muyakwa 1999; Nzeadibe and Iwuoha 2008; Tevera 1993, 1994; Zoya 2008) raise questions related to whether and how reclaimers are organised. There is obviously tremendous value in finding out how reclaimers feel their problems can be addressed and how they are mobilising to do this, and it is somewhat startling that the majority of authors do not engage with these questions. The type of analysis conducted in these empirical studies could be greatly enriched by the more ethnographic approach adopted by Ward and Kamsteeg (2006) who focus on reclaimers as ‘sense making actors’ and explicitly focus on how reclaimers understand and organise their own labour.

Uses and Markets for Reclaimed Materials

Although many authors note the types of materials that reclaimers collect, the literature contains little systematic and in-depth analysis of why reclaimers collect what they do, and what happens to these items once they have been retrieved from the waste stream. Nevertheless, the articles reviewed provide insight into the wide range of uses for reclaimed materials as well as the types of issues which require further analysis and investigation.

Reuse of salvaged materials

While it is often assumed that reclaimers retrieve materials for recycling this is not necessarily the case. Tevera (1994) notes that due to the lack of a local market for recyclables,⁹ the reclaimers he interviewed

⁸ Bjerkli 2005; Langenhove and Dyssel (2007); Nzeadibe (2008); Masocha (2006); Mutenga and Muyakwa (1999); Ralfe (2007); Tevera (1993; 1994); Zoya (2008).

⁹ See below for further discussion.

at the dump in Gaborone, Botswana were focused primarily on retrieving items for direct personal consumption. A number of authors note that reclaimers who collect recyclable materials also salvage items for re-use, such as food, jewellery, blankets, shoes, clothing, fabric, chocolate, chicken feed, used cans, electronics, construction materials, pots and utensils (Achankeng 2003; De Kock 1986; Hallowes and Munnik 2008; Mwanzia 2005, 2005; Nzeadibe 2008; Nzeadibe and Iwuoha 2008; Samson 2008a; Tevera 1993, 1994). These items can either be used by the reclaimers and their families, or can be sold to others in the informal economy (De Kock 1986; Hallowes and Munnik 2008; Nzeadibe and Iwuoha 2008; Samson 2008a).

Arguably, the specific materials collected in each particular place are dependent on a range of factors, including: what is produced and consumed locally (and hence ends up on the landfill); what items the reclaimers require for their own consumption; what items are in demand by others; whether reclaimers are able to collect and sell high value recyclable materials; and the ability of reclaimers to create and/or link into informal markets for the sale of reusable goods. These issues have received scant attention within the literature reviewed. A small number of scholars (De Kock 1986; Hallowes and Munnik 2008; Samson 2008a) provide brief insights into why particular materials such as chocolates and chicken feed are available at certain sites and how reclaimers sell their wares within the informal economy. However, there is no in-depth analysis of the construction of these markets and the dynamics within them. Although Domingos draws on the work of Muller and Scheinberg to highlight that men and women may have different views regarding what is considered waste and how materials can be re-used (Domingos 2007, 25-6), there is also a pervasive silence regarding the gendered nature of the processes through which items are deemed worthy of salvaging and the ways in which they are subsequently consumed and exchanged.

Production of new materials by reclaimers

In addition to re-using salvaged items, reclaimers are also involved in processing reclaimed materials to create new products. In some instances, reclaimers with skills such as carpentry may undertake these activities individually (De Kock 1986, 103-4). However, more frequently it is reported that such activities are initiated by NGOs working with groups of reclaimers. A range of such activities is reported in the literature reviewed. Whilst these often focus on producing crafts for sale to wealthy people, both locally and internationally, they also include composting projects, the production of charcoal briquettes, glue production and even one attempt by an NGO to create a plastics recycling facility (Achankeng 2003; Anschütz and Keita 2004; Fahmi 2005; Fahmi and Sutton 2006; Iskandar 1999; Mwanzia 2005; Myllylä 2001).

Mwanzia (2008) notes that the Mewarema Group in Nakuru, Kenya joined the NAWACOM Co-operative Society which helps it to market its compost, and Iskandar (1999) observes that the marketing of rugs woven by zabbaleen girls in Cairo is conducted by the NGO APE. However, the literature does not contain detailed analysis of the markets for products produced by reclaimers, the income that they generate from these activities or how they view these productive activities in relation to their work as reclaimers.

A report on programmes to support child reclaimers commissioned by the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour concludes that there is a tendency within the programmes analysed to exclude both the children and their parents from decision-making and to adopt a paternalistic, welfarist approach (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) 2004, 27-8). Aside from this the literature reviewed does not interrogate the power dynamics between the NGOs and the reclaimers within NGO-supported projects to produce new materials out of waste. There is also little exploration of how these programmes are shaped by, entrench and/or transform existing inequalities within reclaimer communities. Iskandar (1999) reports that some of the projects initiated by the NGO APE in Egypt explicitly seek to address gender inequalities and improve the status of girls and women. Assaad and Bruce (1997) argue that these efforts have been less effective and sustainable than Iskandar (1999) asserts.

What is missing, however, is an exploration of the ways in which the zabbaleen (both male and female) understand gender and gender relations, how they interpret and think about the NGO's efforts to transform gender relations, and how the NGO's intervention relates to broader struggles and contestations around gender within the zabbaleen community. In addition to gender, similar analysis is required of how NGO programmes affect and rearticulate race, class, ethnicity, nationality and other relevant forms of difference within the specific reclaimer communities they engage with.

Sale of recyclable materials

Whether reclaimers collect recyclable materials is influenced by a host of factors related to the broader political economy. At a more general level, both Palczynski (2002) and Hallows and Munnik (2008) note that to date recycling initiatives are largely industry-driven and are predicated on profitability. Within this context, when and where recycling is profitable there is demand for recyclable materials. If no such demand exists then reclaimers will not prioritise gathering these items.

As Bjerkli's research establishes, local consumption practices impact on the creation of recycling industries in particular places. Bjerkli notes that as Ethiopians have adopted more western consumption habits they consume more plastics. This creates both more demand for locally produced plastic, and also means that post-consumer materials are increasingly available as inputs into local plastics production processes. As a result Bjerkli reports an increase in the amount of plastic produced in Addis Ababa in recent years, and she argues that reclaimers play a critical role in the emerging plastics industry (Bjerkli 2005, 79).

The position of national economies within international trade flows also impacts on their recycling economies. For example, Tevera (1994) argues that the different ways in which Botswana and Zimbabwe were integrated into the global economy in the early 1990s led to vastly differing demands for recyclable materials. In Zimbabwe an acute shortage of foreign currency led to a demand for recyclable materials as inputs into local production processes. In Botswana, however, the boom in diamond sales allowed the Botswana economy to import almost all consumer goods consumed locally, and so there was limited local demand for recyclables. Therefore, as noted above, the reclaimers studied by Tevera focused primarily on collecting items for personal use.

Brief mention is made of the fact that scrap metal from Gaborone was exported to South Africa (Tevera 1994, 28, 29) and that the zabbaleen in Cairo export PET plastic to China (CID Consulting 2008, 16-7). Aside from this, international markets (both within and outside the continent) for recyclables collected in African countries are not explored in the literature reviewed. However, such markets clearly have an impact on whether reclaimers collect recyclable materials. Ferrão specifically argues that given the absence of local manufacturers, the option of exporting metal recyclables should be explored by Mozambique (Ferrão 2006, 91). Recent shifts in both prices of, and demand for, recyclable materials as a result of the global economic crisis will, however, impact on the viability of such strategies (as well as the viability of reclaiming recyclables more generally) and need to be explored.

In those cases where reclaimers are reported to be reclaiming recyclable materials the literature reviewed provides some information on the range of locations and conditions under which they sell their materials. Authors report buyers coming to purchase from reclaimers directly at dumps in cities in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe, sometimes providing them with containers which the buyers collect on a regular basis (Mwanzia 2005, Samson 2008; Tevera 1993; Zoya 2008). As will be further discussed below, some municipalities in South Africa and Zimbabwe are reported to grant particular private companies exclusive right to purchase recyclable materials from landfills (Samson 2008a, 2008b; Tevera 1993). At times these monopsonies can be for specific products, with different companies being granted the right to purchase different materials (Tevera 1993). The enforcement of these monopsonies can have disastrous effects on reclaimers, as they lose their ability to engage with a range of purchasers and negotiate better terms for the sale of their products. These contracts also prevent reclaimers from formalising their activities and moving up the value chain (Samson 2008a, 2008b).

Less attention has been paid in the literature reviewed to the sale of materials by reclaimers working primarily in streets as opposed to landfills. Mwanzia (2006) simply notes the number of middlemen to whom the reclaimers in Nakuru, Kenya sell recyclables. Langenhoven and Dysssel (2007) conduct a useful and sophisticated analysis of reclaimers and buy-back centres in Mitchell's Plain on the Cape Flats in Cape Town, South Africa. They locate their analysis within the current policy context in which the South African government is proactively promoting the establishment of private buy-back centres, although they note that most of the centres in the area of study were created prior to the adoption of this policy. Langenhoven and Dysssel (2007) make an important contribution to the literature as they introduce spatial analysis, something insufficiently employed in the literature that has been reviewed more generally. In particular, they focus on the spatial distribution of the six buy-back centres in the area and how dynamic interaction between them affects their decisions regarding which materials to buy and where to locate. For example, although metals are more lucrative, one buy-back centre specialises in plastics as the others focus on other materials, leaving this centre with a niche in Mitchell's Plain. The authors note that some buy-back centres established branches at other locations in Mitchell's Plain as the older centres were clustered together, which heightened competition. As Mueller (2007) and Ralfe (2007) also report in their studies of Durban, South Africa, the location of buy-back centres is crucially important as reclaimers travel by foot, and if they are located too far away from where the reclaimers work they will not be able to carry their materials to the sites for sale, even if they offer better prices.

Although Langenhoven and Dysssel (2007) provide important insights into the production of localised markets, they do not provide information on who these buy-back centres sell to, or how these centres articulate into the broader recycling economy. This issue is taken up by a number of authors who analyse what they variously refer to as 'brokerage marketing chains' (Mwanzia 2005); 'recycling hierarchies' (Bjerkli 2005; Nzeadibe and Iwuoha 2008; Ralfe 2007); 'recycling chains' (Rogerson 2001); and 'value chains' (Dilata 2008; Mueller 2005; Ngoepe 2007; Visser and Theron 2009; Webster 2007). These authors detail the players at various levels in the hierarchy, usually carefully differentiating between different kinds of reclaimers (such as those who collect from homes and those who collect from bins) as well as different kinds of buyers (ranging from itinerant buyers, to small buy-back centres, to large manufacturers). The South African cases document the powerful influence of large manufacturers who reach all the way down into the process of informal collection by opening buy-back centres and at times even providing reclaimers with carts for collection (Dilata 2008; Mueller 2005; Ngoepe 2007). Bjerkli (2005) and Ngoepe (2007) add depth to the analysis of value chains by locating their respective investigations of the recycling value chains that they study within discussion of how broader trends in the economy affect demand for the particular recyclable materials in question.

There is some limited attention given to social relations within the literature reviewed on value chains. Bjerkli highlights the role of ethnicity in the production of the plastics recycling hierarchy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She notes that whilst the wholesalers and 'korales' (itinerant junk buyers) are from the same Gurage ethnic group, the reclaimers whom she refers to as 'foragers' and 'scavengers' are not. Bjerkli argues that it is only possible to become a korale if you have links to a wholesaler or korale who can provide introductions to a wholesaler, and that ethnicity plays a central role in this process. She therefore concludes that there is "an invisible ethnic segmentation within the informal plastic recovery system, especially in the upper degree of the lower circuit [occupied by the korales] and the lower part of the upper circuit [occupied by the wholesalers]" (Bjerkli 2005, 83).

A number of authors comment on the gendered nature of the value chains they study. Reading the texts together reveals that gender dynamics vary between the contexts. For example, whilst Mueller (2005) finds that reclaimers at the bottom of the recycling value chain for cardboard in Durban, South Africa are women, Nzeadibe and Iwuoha (2008) note that most of the reclaimers they studied in Lagos, Nigeria are men, as are the korales (itinerant junk buyers) studied by Bjerkli (2005) in Ethiopia. As the authors do not interrogate or theorise why this is the case few insights can be gleaned, other than that it is crucial not to make generalised assumptions regarding gender divisions of labour and to explore further how these divisions are produced in particular places.

Relationship Between Formal and Informal Waste Management Economies and Systems

As the previous sections make clear, reclaimed materials are consumed and exchanged in both the informal and formal economies. A number of authors use their studies of reclaimers as an entry point into debates on the nature of the informal economy and its relationship to the formal economy. Indeed, this forms the oldest, and one of the most developed strands within the literature on reclaiming in Africa.

Relationship between the informal and formal economies

In the earliest intervention, De Kock (1986) explicitly engages with arguments that the informal sector should be encouraged and developed in order to provide employment opportunities. Based on her study of reclaimers in Durban, South Africa, she affirms theorisations that see the informal sector as subordinate to, and dependent on, the formal sector. She argues that reclaimers are forced to do this work as they cannot find jobs in the formal sector, that they have no prospect of improving their status within the informal sector and that the solution rather lies in creating formal employment for them within the waste management sector. Tevera (1993, 1994) is similarly dismissive of frameworks that cast the informal sector as a panacea which is somehow detached from the formal sector. In keeping with De Kock's approach, he concludes his studies of reclaimers on landfills in Harare (Tevera 1993) and Gaborone (Tevera 1994) by arguing that while efforts must be made to improve the conditions of reclaimers, the real answer lies in improving economic conditions and creating employment so that people are not forced to seek work in the informal sector.

Following broader shifts in theoretical debates, the more recent literature focuses on the relationship between the formal and informal economies, as opposed to the formal and informal sectors. As is argued within the informal economy literature, the concept of 'sector' is problematic, as the so-called 'informal sector' encompasses a range of highly divergent activities, and each economic sector includes both formal and informal components. Importantly, scholars have moved away from definitions of the informal economy that focus solely on the characteristics of the company, to include attention to employment conditions. This allows us to see the many, intricate ways in which the formal and informal are bound up in one another (Skinner 2002). Bringing this type of analysis into debates on reclaiming, Mueller notes that a small family recycling business may be registered as a formal company, but its survival is predicated on the exploitation of informally employed labour. Similarly, large, formal recycling companies increase profits by sub-contracting other companies to provide them with drivers, who may be employed informally (Mueller 2005, 52-3).

A number of authors argue that the concept of 'value chains' can be employed to demonstrate the ways in which manufacturers of products made from recyclable materials are directly linked to informal reclaimers, on whom they are dependent for some of their inputs (Dilata 2008; Mueller 2005; Ngoepe 2007; Webster et. al. 2008; Visser and Theron 2009). The concept of 'value chains' does, indeed, provide an important analytic that helps to demonstrate the existence of links between the informal and formal recycling economies. Ngoepe (2007) is unique in seeking to establish the strength of this relationship, noting that reclaimers provided 40% of the scrap to small and large recycling firms. However, it is important to recall that reclaimers do not only collect recyclable materials. In some cases, such as that presented by Tevera (1994), they are largely disarticulated from the formal recycling industry and focus on collecting reusable, as opposed to recyclable materials. In the conclusion to her study of street reclaimers in Durban, Ralfe notes that it is unclear to what extent the formal companies depend on materials provided by reclaimers (Ralfe 2007). A range of local factors will determine the depth and strength of these relationships in different places. As varying degrees of dependency open up different strategic possibilities for reclaimers (both to exert their power over formal companies and to develop autonomous modes of organising) it is important to investigate these issues in each particular location.

Relationship between informal reclamation and formal municipal waste management systems

Rather than focusing on the relationship between the informal economy and the formal economy, a second strand in the contemporary literature focuses on the relationship between informal reclamation activities and formal municipal waste management systems. A growing body of work in the international literature details and assesses efforts to formally integrate reclaimers into municipal waste management systems in India and a range of Latin American countries (see, for example, Chikarmane and Narayan 2005; Dias 2000, 2007; Dias and Alves 2008; Gutberlet 2008; Waste Matters SNTD Women's University and Chintan Environment Research and Action Group 2008). This focus on evaluating the success of integration processes is absent in the African literature reviewed, which is perhaps an indication that fewer such initiatives are being undertaken on the continent. Instead, the studies on Africa seek to establish the existence of a relationship between the work of reclaimers and municipal waste systems, and to highlight the problems that arise when this is not acknowledged.

In the African literature reviewed, authors writing about contexts that span Cape Town to Cairo note the central, but unacknowledged role of reclaimers in municipal waste management systems (Assaad 1996; Bjerkli 2005; CID Consulting 2008; Nzeadibe 2008; Nzeadibe and Iwuohaa 2008; Visser and Theron 2009). These arguments are all rooted in an understanding that the formal and informal waste management systems form an integrated whole. The authors suggest that in order for waste management systems to be sustainable and effective it is crucial that the local state formally recognise the role played by reclaimers and other informal actors. Visser and Theron (2009) argue that this should be done in a way that promotes alternatives to private sector models and improves the conditions of those currently working in the informal economy.

Several authors (Bjerkli 2005; Nzeadibe 2008) argue that the local state's failure to acknowledge and engage with the informal system means that interventions to transform the waste management system have unintended consequences and ultimately cannot succeed. However, engaging with the informal waste economy is not a simple process. In an important intervention, Assaad (1996) adopts a conceptualisation of the informal which provides fresh insights into the dynamics of interactions between formal and informal waste management systems. Assaad clarifies that within his framework:

[t]ransactions are informal when they do not rely on standardized, bureaucratic rules and procedures for their execution or enforcement and are not legally recognized by the state. Instead, informal transactions are governed by normative frameworks in which the processes of establishing rules, securing compliance to these rules, and punishing rule breakers are internalized by the individuals involved (Assaad 1996, 117).

Assaad argues that when the municipality of Cairo tried to bring the traditional waste management system under formal control it did not value or understand the informal system's rules and sanctioning processes. It simply assumed that, backed up by the force of the state, it could enforce a new system where contracts for collection activities previously performed by traditional providers were granted to large corporate contractors. However, as the new formal system impinged on and negatively affected the functioning of the informal system, the state was met with fierce resistance from the zabbaleen and waahis. Ultimately the municipality was forced to modify its plans to accommodate the informal system, and the zabbaleen and waahis selectively adopted institutional forms (such as the creation of companies that could apply for licences) that allowed them to engage with the new formalised system, although they retained core elements of their own system (Assaad 1996, 117).

Although his study focuses specifically on the experience in Cairo, what Assaad's intervention highlights is that formally integrating the informal waste management processes into the formal waste management

system is not a simple, bureaucratic process. It is essential for all parties to understand how the different systems being brought together are produced and function, and to negotiate the terms on which the relationship between them is reconfigured. When conducting such analysis it will be crucial to explore social relations within both systems and to interrogate how changing and formalising the terms on which they are brought together will be shaped by and reshape divisions based on gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality and other forms of social division relevant in particular places.

Policy and Legislation

The preceding discussion of the relationship between the informal and formal waste management economies highlights the importance of questions related to policy. However, the overwhelming majority of the texts reviewed make no reference to policy or legislation. As noted above, although there may not be policy or legislation in some countries that deal specifically with reclaimers, this absence is itself important to note. Moreover, it is critically important to interrogate the legislation and policy that does exist to explore how it shapes and affects the environment within which reclaimers function. For example, the authors of the report commissioned by the IPEC/ILO note that as most of the projects to support child reclaimers that they analysed were designed without taking account of government policy, they can be suddenly disrupted by unexpected government initiatives and face challenges in achieving their desired results (IPEC 2004, 22). An understanding of current policy and legislation as well as the processes through which they are developed can also help scholars to identify ways in which the many recommendations that they develop could actually be implemented.

The remainder of this section provides an overview of information on, and analysis of, policy and legislation that is contained within the literature reviewed. The first subsection presents analysis of national and local policy and legislation related to reclaiming. The second subsection focuses on privatisation. The final subsection presents reflections contained within the literature regarding policy processes.

National and local policy and legislation related to reclaiming

Kenya

Henry, Yongsheng and Jun (2006) note that local authorities in Kenya are charged with collecting and disposing of solid and liquid municipal waste. According to the authors, most municipalities employ a centralised approach to waste management, and private sector involvement in waste management is minimal, except in Mombasa City (Henry, Yongsheng and Jun 2006, 95). The authors note that, “[a]lthough there is sufficient legislation covering waste management, local authorities lack the capacity to implement them [sic]” (Henry, Yongsheng and Jun 2006, 96), and that legislation is often not enforced (Henry, Yongsheng and Jun 2006, 97). Unfortunately the authors do not provide further detail on the content of the laws or how they relate to the reclaimers whom they note are present on municipal dumpsites.

Ethiopia

In her study of plastics recycling in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Bjerkli (2005) notes that although the municipality is not completely absent from source separation and recycling, it has also not codified these activities within policy. Reports by local authorities in the city have highlighted the importance of reuse and recycling and the city has committed to some short-term goals in these areas and conducted awareness campaigns. However, the reports do not include action plans for the achievement of these goals, and no mention is made of the role played by the informal sector. Moreover, the *Solid Waste Management Collection and Disposal Regulations of the Addis Ababa City Government* published in 2004 did not include mechanisms to promote recycling and waste minimisation (Bjerkli 2005, 92-3).

Nigeria

Several studies highlight policy issues related to reclaiming in Nigeria. Imam et. al. (2008) draw on the work of Onibokun (1999) to locate their study of solid waste in the city of Abuja, Nigeria within the context of national legislation. In 1988 decree Number 58 established the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA). According to Onibokun, FEPA has a number of responsibilities related to solid waste management. These include studying systems appropriate for local, domestic and industrial waste; specifying waste disposal and treatment methods and disposal sites; setting up and enforcing standards for sanitary facilities; and establishing monitoring programmes and monitoring stations. Relevant legislation and regulations enacted by FEPA include the National Protection Management of Solid and Hazardous Wastes Regulations of 1991; the Pollution Abatement in Industries and Facilities Generating Waste Regulation of 1991, and the General Guidelines for Pollution Abatement in Industries 1991 (Onibokun 1999, cited in Imam et. al. 2008, 469).

Responsibility for solid waste management in the city of Abuja lies with the Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB). Amongst a range of activities it is required to, “assess recycling as a waste management option for industries and government agencies” (Imam et. al. 2008, 469). Imam et. al. note that the only recycling in the city is performed by the informal sector. They advocate for greater co-operation between the informal sector, formal collectors, communities and the state and that reclaimers should be involved in source segregation programmes (Imam et. al. 2008, 470-472). However, they do not specifically comment on whether local waste management policy has included any effort to engage with reclaimers.

This issue is taken up more explicitly by Nzeadibe (2008) in his study of solid waste reforms and informal recycling in Enugu. He notes that the State Government in Enugu received support from the Department for International Development (DFID) in the United Kingdom to improve the solid waste management system. In 2004, Law No. 8 was passed. It delineates roles to be performed by a newly created Ministry of the Environment and the Enugu State Waste Management Authority, which is responsible for managing waste in the State. Nzeadibe criticizes these developments for having been primarily preoccupied with formal private sector participation. No policy exists on informal recycling and no provisions were made to accommodate the reclaimers who quickly took over the new landfill that was developed as part of the reforms. While the authorities do not persecute the reclaimers they also do not assist them, even though they do not have any formal recycling programmes at the landfill (Nzeadibe 2008, 1-2, 5).

South Africa

Within the literature reviewed, South Africa is the only country for which scholars have systematically mapped out and analysed current waste management legislation and policy and how it relates to reclaimers. In their insightful analysis of the politics and political economy of waste in South Africa, Hallowes and Munnik (2008) trace the development of waste policy since the apartheid parliament held its first ‘comprehensive discussion’ on national waste legislation in 1972. Poor, black communities were targeted as sites where (often hazardous and toxic) industrial waste was produced, and where industrial and municipal waste was dumped, both legally and illegally. The state consistently framed its approach to waste in line with the needs and interests of capital. However, Hallowes and Munnik detail how, since the formation of Earthlife Africa in 1988, mobilisation by the environmental justice movement has pushed waste as a social, political and environmental issue onto the agenda, and forced both the apartheid and post-apartheid states to develop policy responses. Importantly, Hallowes and Munnik locate developments in South Africa within the broader context of the contested politics around the negotiation and implementation of the Basel Convention and show how South African policy developments were shaped by interactions at the global scale. Within the post-apartheid period they trace the development of new policy approaches, and highlight the intimate relationship between these processes and developments within the environmental justice movement.

Although a number of scholars (Hallowes and Munnik 2008; Langenhoven and Dysse 2007; Ralfe 2007; Samson 2008a; Zoya 2009) outline and comment on contemporary South African legislation and how it relates to reclaiming and recycling, Saranel Benjamin (2007) provides the most comprehensive and illuminating analysis of current policy and legislation. Benjamin notes that legislative and policy

approaches to reclaiming have been highly inconsistent. Although the National Environmental Management Act of 1998 promotes recycling, it does not mention reclaimers. By contrast, Benjamin observes that the National Waste Management Strategy adopted in 1999 acknowledges the existence of reclaimers. However, this is simply to state that reclaiming will be controlled by 2003 (something which clearly has not been done) and phased out in the long term. According to Benjamin, the White Paper on Integrated Pollution and Waste Management for South Africa from 2000 is the first policy document from the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism that mentions reclaiming. Although the White Paper notes that reclaiming is dangerous, it does not include a strategy regarding how conditions should be improved or who should take responsibility for this.

Benjamin observes that although the Minimum Requirements for Disposal of Waste by Landfill (adopted in 1998 and amended in 2006) discourages salvaging on landfills, it leaves it to the discretion of the permit holder to decide whether to allow reclaiming on the site. Although the annexure related to reclaiming in the 1996 version is quite hostile towards reclaimers, the annexure to the 2006 amended version adopts a more progressive stance. It notes that terms such as scavenging are controversial, confusing and offensive and opts for the language of 'salvaging'. It also lays out minimum requirements for controlling reclaiming on landfills, including that the Operational Plan of the Permit Application must request permission from the Department to allow reclaiming on the site; the layout plan must indicate where reclaiming will take place and how the health and safety of reclaimers will be ensured; the permit holder must formalise the activities of the reclaimers by registering all 'career salvagers', giving them identification, and getting them to elect a committee to represent their interests; contracts should be signed between the reclaimers and the permit holder outlining the systems and controls as set out in the Operational Plan, requiring adherence to the health and safety requirements of the site, committing the permit holder to provide water, ablution and sanitation facilities on site, and elaborating the responsibilities of the parties in terms of the Occupational Health and Safety Act; and reclaimers should be provided with training on site control, the risks involved and the responsibilities of each role player in terms of safety and efficient running of the disposal site.

Benjamin notes that while this represents an important advance, as it is left to the discretion of the permit holder its implementation becomes dependent on the perspective of individual permit holders. As the permit holder is required to absolve the Department of legal liability, there is also a strong disincentive for the permit holder to allow reclaiming on the site. Benjamin notes that despite the possibilities created by the Minimum Requirements, the Gauteng Provincial Waste Management Policy of 2006 does not mention reclaiming, and the KwaZulu-Natal Prevention and Management of Waste Bill of 2007 seeks to completely prohibit reclaiming.

Samson (2008a) argues that the new draft Waste Bill will not dramatically alter the status quo with regard to reclaimers. The Bill promotes the reduction, re-use and recycling of waste. It recognises that waste can be a valuable economic resource and that poor waste management practices disproportionately affect the poor. Samson argues that it is therefore ironic that the Bill initially made no mention of reclaimers who support themselves by turning waste into a resource. She observes that it was only after lobbying by civil society organisations that the proposed amendments to the bill now affirm the provisions of the Minimum Requirements by allowing that a waste management licence for a landfill can stipulate if reclaiming is allowed and under what conditions.

Benjamin (2007), Hallowes and Munnik (2008) and Samson (2008a) all explore how, within the general policy vacuum created by national legislation, there is significant scope for municipalities to develop their own policy approaches. Their research highlights a high degree of variation at the local level. Samson (2008a) identifies three distinct approaches within the three municipalities she studied – complete exclusion of reclaimers from landfills, forced subordination to private companies, and benevolent patriarchy in which reclaimers are accommodated, but on terms defined by the municipality. She is, however, careful to note that these approaches should not be treated as ideal types as the process through which policy is produced, and the nature of the policy, are unique within each context. A number of scholars writing about South African local government policy pick up on this theme and highlight how, rather than being

implemented top-down, municipal policy is the product of contested social processes in which reclaimers are active agents (Hallowes and Munnik 2008; Dobson and Skinner, 2009; Samson 2008a, 2008b; Ward and Kamsteeg 2006). As is further discussed in the following sub-section, Assaad (1996) develops and theorises this point in his arguments regarding the contested production of Cairo's privatisation policy.

Privatisation

Palczynski (2002) observes that privatisation is emerging as a preferred policy option for waste management service delivery in Africa (Palczynski 2002, v). The literature reviewed notes that private sector providers have been contracted in a range of municipalities including Abidjan (Attahi 1999), Abuja (Imam et. al. 2008), Accra (Palczynski 2002), Alexandria (CID Consulting 2008; Fahmi 2005; Fahmi and Sutton 2006; Iskandar 2005; Palczynski 2002), Cape Town (Ferrara 2008; Visser and Theron 2009), Enugu (Nzeadibe 2008), Johannesburg (Palczynski 2002), Mombasa (Henry, Yongsheng, and Jun 2006), Nairobi (Henry, Yongsheng, and Jun 2006; Palczynski 2002) and Yaoundé (Achankeng 2003). However, only a small number of the scholars surveyed critically interrogate the relationship between reclaiming and privatisation. These studies focus on two different forms of privatisation that affect reclaimers – the privatisation of reclamation activities and the privatisation of waste collection – each of which intersects with the traditional activities of reclaimers in different ways.

Privatising reclamation

The IPEC notes that within most developing countries waste has historically been viewed as a common property resource which anyone, including reclaimers, can access and use. When municipalities seek to develop 'modern' waste management systems they typically assert ownership over the waste produced in the city and claim the right to control and regulate how it is collected and disposed of ¹⁰ (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) 2004, 22).

Samson (2008b) draws on and extends these arguments in her study of the attempts by the municipality in Metsimaholo, South Africa to enforce a contract that grants a private company exclusive rights to extract recyclable materials from the Sasolburg dump. She argues that as reclaimers have reclaimed materials from the dump for several decades, efforts by the city amount to an enclosure of the waste commons. According to Samson, this must be seen as a privatised expansion of the public sphere, in which the state is extending its reach into new areas of public policy, albeit in the form of a public-private partnership. The municipality was driven to adopt this approach by its desire to transform waste into a revenue generating commodity to boost municipal income through access fees paid by the contractor. It also believed that the enforcement of such a contract could be used to promote 'black economic empowerment' by providing black entrepreneurs with a new, secure sphere of business. As such, Samson argues that the granting of the contract is part of broader processes of what David Harvey calls 'accumulation by dispossession', in which neoliberal states are creating new spheres of profitable investment for capital by dispossessing communities of what were previously common resources.

Samson emphasises that there was nothing automatic about this process, noting extended and hard fought battles by the reclaimers to resist the imposition of the contract. Ultimately, the adoption of harsh security measures by the state and the company, which included building a military style fence around the dump and calling in the police to physically remove reclaimers from the site, forced the reclaimers to concede temporary defeat. Although they continue to reclaim on the dump they are compelled to sell their materials to the contractor. In the past the reclaimers had sold directly to some of the largest purchasers and manufacturers in the region, and had undertaken a number of steps to formalise their activities. Now the contractor sells to these same companies, but takes a cut of the profit. This has resulted in a dramatic reduction in income for the reclaimers, and has forced them to retract back into the space of the landfill and the sphere of the informal economy. The reclaimers, however, have not given up their struggle and continue to try to overturn the privatisation process (Samson 2008b).

¹⁰ Although the IPEC refers to waste in general, it would be more accurate to refer here to non-industrial waste, as typically industrial waste collection and disposal is not included as a municipal responsibility.

Privatising collection in Cairo

Struggle also features prominently in studies of privatisation in Cairo, Egypt. In this, the most widely documented and analysed case of privatisation in the literature reviewed, the municipality granted formal contracts to private companies to conduct waste collection services. As in the case of Metsimaholo, the municipality's actions represent a privatised expansion of the public sphere, as the state is seeking to establish ownership over garbage and assert its control over the delivery of a service that was previously performed by the informal sector. The primary difference with Metsimaholo is that the contracts in Cairo were for collection. As will be argued below, the fact that they were not concerned with reclamation opened up particular opportunities for the zabbaleen to resist and transform the privatisation process and carve out a place for themselves within it.

As noted above, the municipality first attempted to grant private companies contracts for collection in the 1990s. After fierce resistance and mobilisation by the zabbaleen and waahis the municipality was forced to shift its plans and grant the contracts in some areas to companies formed by these traditional service providers (Assaad 1996). However, in 2003 the municipality forged ahead with a radical privatisation plan. It divided the city into four zones, and contracts for waste collection were granted to multinational companies (an Italian public-private partnership and two Spanish companies) in three of the zones. In the fourth zone the contract was awarded to a public-private partnership formed by the Cairo Cleansing and Beautification Authority (CCBA), which subsequently sub-contracted the work to an Egyptian company (Fahmi 2005, 159; Fahmi and Sutton 2006, 821-822; Iskandar 2005, 11).

In 2003 Laila Iskandar of CID Consulting, who has worked with the zabbaleen and waahis for many years, identified a number of ways in which the zabbaleen could be integrated into international contracts. These include: operating transfer stations where non-organic waste could be recovered and directed to existing traders; continuing to collect household waste from high-income areas which could afford a daily, door-to-door service; receiving the recovered inorganic waste from the recovery business group and continuing to operate recycling and reprocessing businesses at the community level; contracting with commercial waste generators for selected wastes; owning and operating small community-based composting facilities; pooling their financial assets; and connecting the Main Contractor to Trading Networks (Iskandar 2003, 6-7).

None of these options were included in the formal privatisation contracts. However, according to a number of researchers, the companies found it impossible to implement the system envisioned in the contracts. Initially the companies stated that they would hire zabbaleen as collection workers, but since the zabbaleen earn most of their income from recycling they were not interested in working as wage labourers who could not take the waste home to be recycled. Due to the stigma of working with waste the companies could not recruit outsiders to perform this labour. Eventually they agreed to contract the zabbaleen and allow them to work unfixed hours and take the waste home to be separated for recycling. Although this is not permitted in terms of the contract, the CCBA (which oversees the contracts) turns a blind eye in order to ensure that the waste collection system can function (CID Consulting 2008, 23-24; Fahmi and Sutton 2006, 822; Iskandar 2005, 12). Similar to the experiences of the earlier period, privatisation plans were modified in implementation as the companies were forced to accommodate both the workings of the informal system as well as resistance from the zabbaleen.

Although the zabbaleen secured a role for themselves in the new system, they did not do so on completely favourable terms. At the outset of the contract Fahmi found that different stakeholders had widely varying perceptions of privatisation. Whilst the zabbaleen were against privatisation and concerned about their loss of livelihood, the waahis were pragmatically in favour based on their assumption that they would benefit from sub-contracts with the multinationals (Fahmi 2004, 164, 169; Fahmi and Sutton 2005, 823, 834). According to CID Consulting this is, in fact, precisely what happened. As the zabbaleen did not have registered companies, once the companies agreed to involve them in service delivery it was the waahis who received the sub-contracts. The waahis continued to perpetuate historically unequal relations with the zabbaleen, keeping a large percentage of the payments received from the companies for themselves (CID Consulting 2008, 23-4).

In addition to reductions in income, the zabbaleen are also facing more generalised threats to their place in the city. As part of attempts to ‘modernise’ the waste management system, the privatisation efforts are linked to plans to relocate the zabbaleen to areas further outside of the city. This ‘hidden agenda’ of gentrification will have profoundly negative effects on the zabbaleen whose domestic life will be disrupted, and who will be forced to travel great distances for work (Fahmi 2005; Fahmi and Sutton 2006).

The privatisation contracts have also had negative effects on service recipients. Households are now charged higher rates by the city, but are forced to transport their own waste to communal containers. Those who continue to pay zabbaleen for doorstep collection must pay twice for garbage collection (CID Consulting 2008, 24; Iskandar 2005, 12-13). As the contractors do not collect directly from households, valuable recyclable materials are being deposited in the communal waste containers together with household waste. Some zabbaleen have started collecting from these containers in order to augment their income. So too have new entrants into the sector. Privatisation has therefore created a new category of street reclaimers, who are often in conflict with the zabbaleen. Some of these new reclaimers use donkey carts, which the city had successfully stopped the zabbaleen from using in the 1990s. New dynamics generated by privatisation are therefore undermining the achievement of other council policies related to waste management (CID Consulting 2008, 23-4; Aziz 2004, 11; Iskandar 2005, 12-13). Finally, privatisation has also negatively impacted on formal recycling companies. Although the zabbaleen historically recycled 80% of Cairo’s waste, the contractors are only required to recycle 20%. As a result the recycling companies have experienced a dramatic reduction in inputs, and have become active supporters of the zabbaleen (CID Consulting 2008, 23; Iskandar 2005, 15-6). This experience once again affirms the deep linkages between the so-called formal and informal economies.

Reflections on policy processes

A small number of scholars reflect on the nature of policy processes related to reclaiming and recycling. Based on experience working to incorporate informal waste collection services into formal systems in cities across Egypt, CID Consulting emphasises that, “there is no blueprint for development or for solid waste solutions”. It argues that policy processes need to start with the community, involve a wide range of actors and, “be grounded in local knowledge, history and expertise” (CID Consulting 2001, 1). Similarly, Fahmi and Sutton emphasise the importance of local participatory methods in restructuring solid waste collection and developing recycling (Fahmi and Sutton 2006, 809-810).

Several scholars reflect on the centrality of learning within transformative policy processes. Iskandar (1999) highlights the numerous ways in which Cairo’s zabbaleen deepened their understanding of their market, and subsequently transformed the ways in which they collect waste and process reusable and recyclable materials. Thus, informal learning was central to the development of the highly effective recycling system in the city. However, Iskandar argues that problems arose as the municipalities, the public and the media did not learn from the experience of the zabbaleen and did not acknowledge their role within the waste management system. The development of appropriate policy therefore requires finding ways to support learning within the city.

Johnson and Wilson (2000) focus on the challenges in sharing learnings and developing common understandings across different stakeholders. Based on their involvement in a policy process in Bindura, Zimbabwe they argue that learning needs to be built into development initiatives and propose a methodology through which different actors can develop common norms and behaviours. The question that they do not tackle sufficiently is what happens when different stakeholders have conflictive and opposing interests. Clearly in some instances it may not be possible or even desirable to develop common understandings.

A further issue raised within the literature reviewed relates to the importance of taking existing social relations into account. It is argued that this is necessary to ensure that policy builds on successful initiatives within the informal economy. A number of authors also observe that when policy ignores reality on the ground it is doomed to fail (Assaad 1996; Bjerkli 2005; Johnson and Wilson 2000). Following the example of Belo Horizonte, in Brazil, which established a Social Mobilisation Unit in its waste management department staffed by social scientists from a range of disciplines, one author (Samson 2008a) argues that there is a need for municipalities to build their capacity to address waste as a social issue.

Engaging with the social relations in the waste sector will require municipalities to develop meaningful forms of interaction with reclaimers. A few authors note instances where municipalities proactively engage reclaimers (Benjamin 2007; Hallowes and Munnik 2008; Samson 2008a; Zoya 2008), or at least tolerate them and do not harass them (Tevera 1994; Masocha 2006). However, authors writing about a number of cities, including Cairo, Egypt (Aziz 2004); Durban, South Africa (De Kock 1986; McLean 2000b; Mueller 2005); Metsimaholo, South Africa (Hallowes and Munnik 2008, Samson 2008a, 2008b), Msunduzi, South Africa (Hallowes and Munnik 2008, Samson 2008a); and Nakuru, Kenya (2006) note that reclaimers in these municipalities are harassed by local authorities including police and waste management officials.

As Fahmi and Sutton note, transformation in the attitudes of both the government and the public is required if issues related to reclaiming are to be addressed (Fahmi and Sutton 2005, 33). The texts reviewed include a number of proposals regarding how the local state could help to shift public perceptions of reclaimers, including conducting media campaigns and running cultural events that highlight and re-value the work of reclaimers, such as the Waste and Citizenship Festival, and reclaimers' carnival in Belo Horizonte, Brazil (Mueller 2005, 82). However, as many municipal, state and national officials also currently hold negative and prejudiced views of reclaimers it has been suggested that special programmes should be run to sensitise government officials regarding the important work that reclaimers perform (Samson 2008a, 51). While such initiatives can play an important role in transforming the attitudes of officials, the key to reclaimers being engaged as legitimate stakeholders within waste management and municipal policy processes will be reclaimers developing their own collective identities and mobilising to demand that they be recognised within the public sphere (Samson 2008b).

Theorising the Role of Reclaimers

The question of the identity and role of reclaimers is dealt with by a small number of authors in the literature reviewed. Interestingly, the earliest intervention by De Kock (1986) is the only one to engage with arguments that frame reclaimers as entrepreneurs. Based on her survey of reclaimers in Durban, South Africa, De Kock argues that they cannot be seen as incipient capitalists (De Kock 1986, 139) and draws on Chris Birkbeck's influential research on the 'scavengers' in Cali, Colombia, to argue that they are workers. Writing in the late 1970s, Birkbeck argues that although 'scavengers' appear to be independent they are completely dependent on the large consumers of recuperated materials who are the ultimate purchasers of their products. As a result he asserts that the 'scavengers' work for these companies, even if they are not directly employed by them, and must be seen as 'self-employed proletarians' (Birkbeck 1978, 1979). De Kock concurs that the same analysis is applicable to the reclaimers that she studied in Durban (De Kock 1986, 133). Similarly, in another early study Tevera draws on Birkbeck and argues that the reclaimers at Harare's Teviotdale dump must be regarded as 'piece-workers' who receive a 'piece-wage' (Tevera 1993, 88). Birkbeck's work has continued to be strongly influential, being cited by almost all of the authors who conceptualise reclaimers as workers.

Benjamin (2007) introduces a focus on child labour into discussions on the status of reclaimers as workers. In her ILO-commissioned study, Benjamin finds that child labour on South Africa's dumps and landfills is pervasive. According to Benjamin, the children are exposed to significant risks and are highly exploited. She argues that such labour contravenes international agreements and treaties as well as South Africa's own laws on child labour, and should be banned.

Starting with Mueller's 2005 study, a number of authors have adopted the analytic of 'value chains' to explore the conditions of reclaimers and other workers labouring in different parts of the same value chain. Mueller draws on the work of scholars such as Skinner, Ramamurthy and Dunway who argue that value chain analysis has traditionally ignored questions of labour and must be reframed to be attentive to labour-related issues (cited in Mueller 2005, 14-5). In addition to the production view of value chains, which focuses on a chain of activities in the waste management sector, Mueller therefore also employs a socio-economic view that explores working conditions and peoples' relations to one another (Mueller 2005, 35).

Visser and Theron (2009) see reclaimers as an integral part of Cape Town's solid waste management system. They locate reclaimers within what they refer to as the 'waste collection chain' and compare their conditions to other workers who perform informal waste collection, such as those who work for companies sub-contracted by the Cape Town municipality. By contrast, Mueller (2005), Ngoepe (2007), Dilata (2008) and Webster et. al. (2007) all focus on reclaimers as being at the bottom of the recycling value chain. Whilst Mueller focuses only on reclaimers, in a series of related reports the other authors expand their frame of analysis to include workers in other parts of the value chain in order to conduct a comparative analysis of labour conditions within the chain. The authors use Guy Standing's seven indexes of security to calculate a 'decent work deficit' for workers along this value chain which is based on their levels of labour market, employment, job, work, skills reproduction, income and representation security. They conclude that reclaimers have the lowest ranking on the decent work deficit within the paper and metals recycling chain, and that compared to workers in small clothing companies, bars and shebeens (informal bars), as well as sub-contracted workers in platinum mines, reclaimers rank above only those who work in shebeens and bars (Dilata 2008; Ngoepe 2007; Webster et. al. 2007).

Ngoepe (2007) and Dilata (2008) make a number of recommendations regarding how to improve the status of reclaimers as workers. These include local government acknowledging them as workers, making them visible and forming relationships to find out what they would like local government to do; local government providing them with education and training; assisting reclaimers to formalise relations with the companies that they sell to; the establishment of municipal source segregation programmes that include reclaimers; local government encouraging entrepreneurs to form buy-back centres and hire reclaimers; the establishment of materials recycling facilities that would employ reclaimers; the formation of a union by reclaimers to increase their bargaining power; registration of reclaimers by government; and regulation of the sector by government (Dilata 2008; Ngoepe 2007).

In the overall report that brings Dilata's and Ngoepe's papers together with studies of workers in other parts of the informal economy, Webster et. al. (2007) conclude by motivating for the development of an active labour market policy and new regulatory framework. In particular, they argue that the South African Department of Labour should intervene in supply chains and construct a different set of relationships that would improve the status of workers. Specific recommendations include the regulation of labour standards via supply chains by disrupting the flow of goods and services from buyers who do not comply with decent work standards; assessing the possibility of outlawing labour brokers; and exploring the introduction of labour market intermediaries who would play a more developmental and facilitative role (Webster et. al. 2007, 2-5). Although such interventions could assist workers such as those sub-contracted in mines and those who work in shebeens and small clothing manufacturers, it is unclear how this new regulatory framework and the imposition of labour laws could be applied to reclaimers, who, as the authors themselves note, are not technically employed by the companies that purchase their materials. That is, of course, unless the implicit argument is that reclaimers should all be employed by municipalities and/or companies within the value chain. As noted above, Dilata (2008) and Ngoepe (2007) do indeed argue that this should be done. In this they are supported by De Kock (1986) and Tevera (1993). Although Visser and Theron (2009) concur that this would be a good way to improve the working conditions of reclaimers, they argue that this is not likely within the current political and economic context, and propose that instead municipalities should formally contract co-operatives of reclaimers.

As noted above, the authors within this strand benefited from insights drawn from Birkbeck's theorisation of reclaimers as 'self-employed proletarians', which leads them to unpack and analyse the relationship between reclaimers, buyers and manufacturers. Their analysis is, however, also hindered by the limitations inherent within Birkbeck's framework. Like Birkbeck, they focus on identifying the structural location of reclaimers within the waste management economy and value chain in order to assert their status as workers. However, this overly structural analysis fails to seriously grapple with the subjective aspects of how reclaimers see themselves, whether they identify as workers, and whether they would like to be employees. Most of the authors noted above who advocate transforming reclaimers into paid employees do not interrogate whether this is what reclaimers themselves would prefer. Those who do take up this issue do not meaningfully engage with the stated preferences of the reclaimers. For example, Ngoepe simply notes that it is ironic that reclaimers do not want to become formalised or have an employer (Ngoepe 2007, 42) but does not explain why this is considered ironic. Although De Kock reports that 39.5% of the reclaimers she interviewed value their independence and prefer picking to a job, she dismissively cautions that, "one cannot place too much emphasis on this type of response as people have strong tendencies to rationalise their existence in order to adjust to the emotional stress caused by unpleasant situations... in other words, pickers who felt they had no chance of obtaining a wage job would say that they prefer picking" (De Kock 1986, 119-120).¹¹

While De Kock chooses to disregard the reported opinions of reclaimers, literature from other parts of the world has, in fact, shown that there is nothing natural or automatic about reclaimers either identifying as workers or wanting to become paid employees. For example, Chikarmane and Narayan (2005) detail how it was only as a result of consciousness-raising political education that members of the KKP KP trade union in Pune, India began to see themselves as workers rather than housewives. Although they mobilise around their rights as workers, the KKP KP members value their autonomy and do not want to become employees of government or private business, preferring to form alternative forms of collective worker organisation. As noted above, the zabbaleen explicitly rejected being transformed into waged employees (CID Consulting 2008, 23-24; Iskandar 2005, 12)

Within the current African context – in which many governments proactively promote the concept of entrepreneurship; many donors, NGOs and other external agencies explicitly frame reclaimers as 'entrepreneurs'; and, traditional workers' organisations are not forging relations with reclaimers – it is not a given that reclaimers will see themselves as workers. As the literature reviewed notes, at least some reclaimers have made clear their desire to retain the independence that they do have, even if they are economically dependent on purchasers higher in the value chain. How reclaimers see and understand themselves has a profound impact on whether and how they will organise, the type of organisations that they will form, and the objectives that they will establish for these organisations. From an organising perspective it is therefore crucial that future research move beyond structural analyses and interrogate how reclaimers understand the work that they do and its role within the waste management and recycling economies and labour markets, how they identify themselves and how they would like to be positioned in the waste management and recycling economies in the future.

¹¹ By contrast, Zoya (2008), whose policy-oriented study is not influenced by Birkbeck, argues that as the reclaimers at the landfill in Ekurhuleni, South Africa value the independence of their labour, the municipality should find ways to formalise their work and improve their conditions without turning them into paid employees.

Organising

A number of authors engage in different ways with issues related to the organising of reclaimers. The literature related to organising can be grouped into five broad themes related to reclaimer organisations; organising by government; the role of NGOs, religious organisations and donors; organising by mass-based organisations; and the political context of organising.

Reclaimer organisations

As noted above, most of the studies that focus on establishing empirical information about reclaimers do not conceptualise reclaimers as active agents and do not investigate whether or how they are organised. It is worth highlighting that as a result, the fact that they do not report on the existence of organising initiatives amongst the reclaimers does not necessarily imply that no organisations exist in the places which they studied. It is highly possible that reclaimers are organised, but as this was not of interest to the researchers it was neither observed nor recorded.

A small number of authors who did not find reclaimer organisations, but were sensitive to issues related to organising, include useful comments on this topic. Domingos (2001) observes that although there are no formal organisations on the Hulene landfill in Maputo, Mozambique, there is a high level of informal organisation based on both gender and age. According to McLean (2000b), the reclaimers she interviewed in Durban, South Africa thought the formation of an organisation would be useful (McLean 2000b, 19). Domingos (2001), Mutenga and Muyakawa (1999), and Ralfe (2007) argue that reclaimers should be encouraged and assisted to form organisations, while Dilata (2008) advocates the formation of a union, and Ngoepe (2007) argues for the establishment of an industry-wide formal organisation representing the interests of reclaimers in South Africa.

Writing as early as 1993, Tevera (1993) explicitly critiques notions that the dumps in Harare are areas of “crime, marginality, and lawlessness”. He observes “remarkable order and discipline” amongst the reclaimers at the Teviotdale landfill in Harare, whom, he emphasises, were organised into a committee (Tevera 1993, 94). Similarly, Nzeadibe and Iwouoha (2008) critique and disprove assumptions that reclaimers are not organised by providing information on what they variously refer to as either a co-operative or a union at the Ojota landfill in Lagos, Nigeria (Nzeadibe and Iwouoha 2008, 27). Zoya (2008) documents the existence of the Masakhane committee on the landfill in Ekurhuleni, South Africa, and Ngoepe (2007, 27) briefly mentions an informal committee at the Marie Louise Landfill in Johannesburg. Each of these authors provides some information on the structure and activities of the relevant organisation. Tevera (1993) notes that the reclaimers in Harare had been encouraged to form their organisation by the post-independence municipal government. Aside from this, no information or analysis is provided regarding why and how the reclaimers were organised.

More attention is paid to the social history of reclaimer organisation in Samson's study of the Sasolburg landfill in Metsimaholo municipality. This research highlights how women and older men who were unable to challenge the informally enforced monopoly of young men over the collection of more lucrative scrap metal seized what power they could by forming an organisation for paper and plastics reclaimers that excluded the young men. The young men subsequently formed their own organisation, resulting in two committees, each registered as closed corporations, on the same landfill. Thus, divisions of labour based on gender and age became crystallised within the organisational forms created on the landfill. The study notes that successful, united mobilisation against the repressive policies of the municipality will require the reclaimers to grapple with and address these tensions and inequalities (Samson 2008a; Samson2008b).

Organising by Government

The role of external organisations in organising reclaimers is the subject of some discussion within the literature. Benjamin (2007), Hallows and Munnik (2008), and Samson (2008) all describe how the Superintendent for Landfill Management in South Africa's Emfuleni municipality played a pivotal role in forming reclaimer committees on the municipality's landfills. The committees have helped to ensure a more orderly working environment on the landfills. However, due to their dependence on the Superintendent (who attends meetings, drives the vision and even holds the money for their funeral savings funds) these are not truly independent organisations.

Researchers writing about the Brazilian experience argue that this need not be the case when government is involved in establishing reclaimer organisations. According to Dias and Alves (2008), in the 1980s progressive local government administrations controlled by the Workers' Party played a key role in catalysing the formation of what is now the strongest independent reclaimers' movement in the world. This role was, however, predicated on a commitment by the party and its officials to the concept of autonomy and was embedded within the party's overall mission to create a more democratic, participatory state. Within the African context there is a need to critically evaluate both the role being played by local and national governments in hindering, facilitating and shaping the form of reclaimer organisations and how this relates to broader government agendas.

NGOs, religious organisations and donors

Aside from governments, a range of other external agents is also involved in organising reclaimers and/or co-ordinating activities for them. These actors include NGOs, religious organisations and donors.

A number of authors writing about Egypt note the role of the Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in initiating efforts to form the El Gam'iyya (the Waste Collectors' Association) in Cairo in the mid-1970s. Presently the Catholic Church continues to play a strong role in the organisation. Although community leaders helped to transform it from a charity organisation into a community-based organisation, there is general consensus within the literature that it is dominated by a small group and does not represent the interests of the broader community. The Association focuses more on income-generating activities and credit programmes than on political mobilisation by zabbaleen (Iskandar 1999; Myllylä 2001; Fahmi 2005; Fahmi and Sutton 2006).

The NGO, Practical Action, has taken a different, more grounded approach to working with reclaimers in Kenya. In a series of papers, Patrick Mwanzia of Practical Action provides insight into how the organisation conducted research on reclaimers in Nakuru, Kenya with the explicit purpose of informing the development of Practical Action's programme for working with the reclaimers. Although Practical Action's activities include initiatives such as arranging health clinics, negotiating access to schools and organising a football team, these are all part of a broader process through which the NGO is seeking to facilitate organising by the reclaimers (Mwanzia 2005, 2006, 2007).

Whilst Practical Action seeks to work with and organise existing reclaimers, other external agents focus on promoting reclaiming as an income generating activity and bringing new people into the world of reclaiming. For example, Johnson and Wilson (2000) analyse how the interdenominational Christian Group 'Christians on the Move' and the NGO Environment 2000 co-operated in an initiative to help impoverished widows move into recycling as a livelihood strategy. Similarly, Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and the NGO COURC are encouraging SDI affiliates to start reclaiming in order to generate revenue for their savings groups. SDI and COURC are also supporting these initiatives by promoting international exchanges between reclaimers in Egypt, Kenya and South Africa in order to share ideas and build capacity (Bolnick 2006; COURC 2005; Ferrara et al. 2008).

A third form of engagement by external agents with reclaimers, as identified in the literature reviewed, relates to the promotion of welfarist and developmental activities for reclaimers intended to improve their skills and provide them with alternative sources of income. A number of authors document the programmes of the Association for the Protection of the Environment (APE) and CID Consulting in Egypt (Assaad and Bruce 1997; Iskandar 1999, 2000, 2007; Kamel 2000; Medina 2007). These programmes include a composting plant, a rug-weaving project for girls to produce craft products for wealthy consumers, a shampoo bottle recycling plant for boys, and a brick factory. Each project focuses on increasing incomes, primarily by augmenting the value added to reclaimed materials (although in the case of the shampoo bottle project the reclaimers are teamed with a multinational corporation to remove used bottles from the informal economy to prevent the sale of counterfeit products). As development practitioners realised that it would be difficult for reclaimer children to attend regular schools due to their need to earn an income, the projects are also specifically designed as sites for non-formal education on issues ranging from literacy to hygiene. Although the programmes intentionally do not challenge gender divisions of labour, they proactively seek to empower girls and transform gender relations. Iskandar (2007) argues that the rug-weaving project for girls has contributed to more girls staying in school; an increasing number of girls delaying marriage until after 18 years of age; more women and girls saying that they will not subject girls to genital mutilation (referred to as 'circumcision' by Iskandar); and more women and girls reporting that they will practice birth control. However, taking a more critical stance Assaad and Bruce (1997) note that once the girls were married they found it difficult to maintain these perspectives and to continue participating in income-generating activities.

In an important intervention into the debate, Myllylä (2001) moves beyond descriptive analyses and theorises the role of the APE. She locates her study of the APE within a broader analysis of the place of NGOs in contemporary governance in Egypt. Myllylä notes that since the 1970s, as the role of the state has been reduced, NGOs have played an increasingly important role within Egypt. This is particularly true in the sphere of environmental policy, where, according to Myllylä, the relevant government ministry has been relatively more open to NGOs and public participation. Myllylä notes that NGOs in Cairo tend to be initiated from above by middle and upper class Egyptians with degrees. The NGOs are tightly woven into the state with many having a member or lobbyist in the Assembly. External funding for NGOs must be approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry can assign a government employee to the board of directors or even close NGOs down.

The relationship between the APE and government (as well as international financial institutions) is even more intimate, as it emerged directly out of a World Bank funded government initiative to improve solid waste management and upgrade the zabbaleen settlement of Mokattam. The World Bank had contracted consulting firm EQI to run the project. When EQI proposed a composting project it found that the Waste Collector's Association did not have the capacity to run it. EQI therefore spearheaded the formation of the APE. Myllylä notes that the APE now argues that it is 80% run by zabbaleen and likes to present itself as a grassroots organisation. Myllylä does not pass direct judgement on this assertion, and regrettably does not interview zabbaleen to explore their perspective on the APE and its touted transformation. Read against Myllylä's own analysis of the APE's history and the context within which it was formed it would seem that there are strong historical, social and political factors which would mitigate against so thorough a shift in organisational form and culture and which require investigation.

Myllylä's rich study highlights the importance of locating NGOs within their broader social, political and economic contexts in order to tease out the various agendas that inform their engagements with reclaimers. Reclaimers are not passive recipients of these agendas. However, the actions and ideologies of external agents shape the terrain within which reclaimers function and generate practical and strategic issues with which the reclaimers must engage. Currently there is a silence within the literature reviewed regarding how reclaimers view the external agencies that seek to work with them and how they feel these organisations affect their ability to organise and determine and achieve their own goals. Clearly this is an area that requires further investigation.

Organising by mass based organisations

The successful recruitment of reclaimers by the Self Employed Women's Union (SEWU) in Durban, South Africa is the only example in the literature reviewed of an external, mass-based organisation recruiting and servicing reclaimers. SEWU was established in 1994 as the interests of self-employed women were not being addressed within traditional trade unions. Although SEWU is more strongly associated with street vendors (who comprised more than half of its membership), several scholars report that the union began organising women cardboard collectors in Durban's central business district in the mid-1990s (Dobson and Skinner 2009, 11; Mueller 2005, 73-4). By 1998, according to the municipality, at least 200 women reclaimers in Durban's city centre had joined SEWU (cited in McLean 2000, 4).

After identifying key problems encountered by the reclaimers, SEWU focused on strengthening their capacity and transforming the policy environment. Mueller reports that in order to decrease cheating by purchasing agents SEWU persuaded one of the main recycling companies to provide the reclaimers with training to read the scales and to send representatives to monitor the agents. SEWU also provided the reclaimers with t-shirts from a competitor recycling company to frighten the agents and make them realise that the reclaimers had other options if they were treated poorly (Mueller 2005, 59). Both Mueller (2005) and Dobson and Skinner (2009) outline how SEWU successfully negotiated with the local council to establish a buy-back centre as a joint initiative between SEWU, the council and key middlemen and recycling companies in the city. Each partner contributed to the establishment and running of the centre. The buy-back centre enabled reclaimers to cut out the middlemen and sell directly to the recycling companies, and they were able to increase their income by an average of 250%. The buy-back centre encountered a number of problems, including disputes over land, resistance from middlemen, a location that was too far for many reclaimers to access, lack of storage space, and ignorance of its existence on the part of reclaimers. Nevertheless, the authors concur that it was an important initiative that helped to transform the recycling terrain in Durban (Dobson and Skinner 2009; Mueller 2005).

Although the authors provide useful information on SEWU's activities with reclaimers, they present little analysis of how SEWU organised the reclaimers and the challenges that it faced in doing so. Such critical interrogation of the process of organising could provide valuable insights for reclaimers and organisations working with them in other contexts. Unfortunately SEWU closed in 2004. It is unclear whether the reclaimers who had joined the union are still organised. Former SEWU staff are presently involved in launching a new organisation, which could possibly take up the organising of reclaimers in Durban.¹²

The political context of organising

The political context of organising by reclaimers receives some, though not necessarily sufficient, attention in the literature. As noted above, SEWU was formed as a result of the traditional trade unions paying only limited attention to workers in the informal economy. While it seems clear that little has been done by traditional trade unions to organise reclaimers, most scholars seem to accept this as a fact. Only Samson (2008a) makes an effort to interview union representatives to understand why this is the case. She finds that union representatives in the South African cities she studied often share many of the same biases and discriminatory attitudes towards reclaimers as other members of society, that they do not see reclaimers as 'workers', and that they are frequently fearful of engaging with reclaimers on landfills as the reclaimers' presence is technically illegal and the union members do not want to be seen to be contravening the law. Union representatives reported that it had not even occurred to them that they should meet with the reclaimers, even though they organise municipal employees working on the same sites. There is a need for researchers to critically interrogate the reasons why unions are not engaging with reclaimers. The very process of doing so can play a role in helping to transform union attitudes towards reclaimers.¹³

There is also a need to think through how organising by reclaimers is shaped by, and in turn shapes, the broader political economy. Reclaimers, as Hallows and Munnik observe, operate within the harsh constraints

¹² Personal communication with Caroline Skinner.

¹³ Personal experience.

of capitalism. On the one hand they are challenged by privatisation and on the other rely on access to the markets of the consumption cities. The strategies of organised pickers, like that of other groups of informal workers, have largely aimed at moving up the value chain defined by capital....The most immediate difficulty is that the markets for recyclables are notoriously fickle and can collapse overnight. Beyond that, people are trying to improve their position, and are constrained to do so within the system that makes ever more people waste (Hallowes and Munnik 2008, 188-9).

Whilst Hallowes and Munnik (2008) are correct in identifying a trend towards integration into the capitalist economy amongst a (potentially large) segment of reclaimer organisations, others do have different agendas. For example, the Brazilian national movement (MNCR) specifically seeks to form class alliances with other marginalised and exploited groups and to transform the capitalist economy by developing new models of organising and service delivery and by transforming the value chain as opposed to simply progressing within it (www.mncr.org.br). However, the literature reviewed captures virtually no debate or discussion around how these tactical and strategic questions are being addressed by African organisations of reclaimers. As Samson (2008b) argues, it is critically important to interrogate how reclaimer organisations in Africa position themselves in relation to the capitalist economy and to explore the extent to which they are achieving their goals. Such analysis will need to be attentive to the ways in which the current economic crisis and downturn in demand for recyclables are affecting reclaimer organisations and the goals that they define for themselves.

Priorities for Future Research

As the preceding review demonstrates, there is a significant body of English-language research that provides important insights into reclaiming in Africa. This study has, however, identified a number of areas that require further investigation, as well as some ways in which it could be useful to reframe how research on reclaiming in Africa is conceptualised. This final section concludes the review by identifying some key priorities for future research. Emphasis is placed on research that can help to inform efforts to support organising by reclaimers and establish more inclusive policy on reclaiming.

Reclaimer demographic and conditions

A relatively large number of studies reviewed focus on the demographics and conditions of reclaimers working on landfills and in the streets. These studies present useful information on the work and lives of reclaimers in a range of sites across the continent. However, many of these studies are limited by the ways in which they are framed. Most are quantitative and descriptive, but are based on extremely small samples. There is a need for larger-scale studies whose findings can be generalised, at least to the sites being studied. It is also important that future studies unpack the 'facts' presented and reflect on the dynamics through which they are produced. This will help to provide insight into the reasons for differences between places studied, as well as the particular needs, challenges and interests of reclaimers in each place. Focusing on how the current situation is created and maintained will also help to illuminate possibilities and avenues for change. For each site studied, some of the key issues to be explored and theorised include: why particular racial, gender and ethnic divisions of labour exist, how they are maintained and how they are contested; how broader economic factors help to determine which types of materials reclaimers collect and what they do with these materials; how waste management and other policies, as well as the attitudes of officials, affect the ability of reclaimers to work at the site and sell their materials; how reclaimers are organised, both formally and informally; and how forms of organisation either entrench or transform divisions between reclaimers.

Within these studies it will be crucial to frame reclaimers as active agents and to explore why they do the work of reclaiming, what they understand the benefits and challenges of their work as being, how they address their challenges, what their aspirations are and how they are working towards realising them.

Markets and the relationship between formal and informal economies

The literature reviewed establishes that there is an intimate relationship between reclaimers and the formal recycling economy, as reclaimers who collect recyclable materials provide the latter with inputs for production processes. There is, however, a need for research that explores the extent to which reclaimers and formal recycling companies in different places are dependent on each other, as reclaimers in some places may focus more on collecting materials for own consumption or sale in the informal economy. In addition, even when reclaimers sell most of their materials to formal recycling companies, this may form a smaller or larger proportion of inputs for these companies. As varying degrees of dependency open up different strategic possibilities for reclaimers (both to exert their power over formal companies and to develop autonomous modes of organising) it is necessary to investigate the strength and form of these relationships in each particular location.

Within the context of the current global economic crisis it will be important to explore how reclaimers have been affected by drops in the prices for some recyclables, and whether shifts in the global economy have led reclaimers to change the types of materials that they collect, how they use them, and whether they sell them into the formal or informal economies. If reclaimers were previously dependent on selling to recycling companies, it will be useful to discern how they are coping with drops in prices and whether they are diversifying their livelihood strategies as a result.

Policy

Policy and legislation shape the terrain within which reclaimers work and organise, yet surprisingly little research has been conducted into issues related to policy and legislation. As an initial starting point it will be important to document and critically assess existing national, provincial/state and local policies and laws that relate to, and affect, reclaiming and recycling. Rather than simply cataloguing policies and laws, such research should focus on the politics and processes through which they are developed, as this can provide insight into how they can be changed. The scope and reasons for provincial/state and local variation should be explored, as this also assists in uncovering the possibilities for reclaimers to promote changes even within the current legislative context.

Relationship between reclaimers and municipal waste management systems

In contrast to the literature on India and Latin America, little research has been conducted into how reclaimers in Africa are positioned in relation to municipal waste management systems. Cases where municipalities have attempted to formally integrate reclaimers should be identified and critically analysed. Careful attention should be paid to how such processes of formalisation entrench and/or transform social divisions and power relations between reclaimers. It will also be useful to analyse how municipal systems that do not officially recognise the role of reclaimers affect the work of reclaimers, and to document the unacknowledged contribution of reclaimers to these systems.

Relationships with government, donors, NGOs, international financial institutions, religious organisations and other external agents

The literature reviewed reveals that governments, NGOs, donors, international financial institutions and religious organisations have been involved in catalysing the formation of some reclaimer organisations and projects for reclaimers. There is a need for research that critically interrogates the agendas of these external agents; how reclaimers view them and their interventions; the power relations between reclaimers

and external agents; how interventions by external agents entrench and/or transform inequalities between reclaimers and how reclaimers view these interventions; and how these external agents affect the ability of reclaimers to organise themselves and determine and achieve their own goals.

Less mention is made in the literature reviewed of traditional working class organisations such as unions and organisations of informal workers. Research should explore whether any links have been forged between these types of organisations and reclaimers. If few links exist, research should explore the reasons why and the possibilities for forging future connections.

Organising

Scant attention has been paid to questions related to organising in the literature reviewed and little has been recorded regarding how reclaimers are organised, both formally and informally. Even where reclaimers are not formally organised it will be useful to study how they informally organise to manage their daily work and to address their problems, issues, and aspirations. Careful attention should be paid to whether and how such forms of organising reinforce and/or transform social divisions based on gender, race, ethnicity and nationality.

Focusing on more formal organisation, at the most basic level there is a need to map existing reclaimer organisations and networks in African countries. This exercise can provide greater insight into current levels of organisation and can help to facilitate networking within countries, across the continent and around the world. Where organisations do exist it will be valuable to conduct research focusing on why and how they were formed; their objectives; how they recruit, service and involve members; how they are structured and governed; whether they exclude certain types of reclaimers (based on race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, type of material collected), and if so, the reasons for and implications of these exclusions; how they understand their place and role as reclaimers in the economy; their economic goals; their political orientations; and how they relate to other reclaimer organisations as well as other movements and organisations. Such research will be valuable in deepening understanding of the dynamics and politics of organising reclaimers in Africa, and distilling lessons for other organising initiatives.

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About Inclusive Cities: The Inclusive Cities project aims to strengthen membership-based organizations (MBOs) of the working poor in the areas of organizing, policy analysis and advocacy, in order to ensure that urban informal workers have the tools necessary to make themselves heard within urban planning processes. Inclusive Cities is a collaboration between MBOs of the working poor, international alliances of MBOs and those supporting the work of MBOs. For more information visit: www.inclusivecities.org.

About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global research-policy-action network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO builds alliances with, and draws its membership from, three constituencies: membership-based organizations of informal workers, researchers and statisticians working on the informal economy, and professionals from development agencies interested in the informal economy. WIEGO pursues its objectives by helping to build and strengthen networks of informal worker organizations; undertaking policy analysis, statistical research and data analysis on the informal economy; providing policy advice and convening policy dialogues on the informal economy; and documenting and disseminating good practice in support of the informal workforce. For more information visit: www.wiego.org.



Women in Informal Employment
Globalizing and Organizing