

# Organizing Reclaimers in Tshwane, South Africa: Lessons from the Top Down and Bottom Up Experiences

A summary based on the report by Melanie Samson

Because reclaimers have been working in Tshwane (Pretoria) area landfills for at least thirty years, they have seen, struggled against and created many changes in municipal approaches to recycling. Each change has had important effects on their livelihoods. After providing some background on reclaiming in Tshwane, this leaflet aims to tell the story of these changes so that other reclaimers, municipalities and organizations that help reclaimers can learn from Tshwane's key struggles and successes. It looks at:

- how reclaimers organized and fought to gain entrance to landfills
- the positive and negative results of municipal projects aimed at helping reclaimers
- how reclaimers, by forming their own Network, are strengthening organizations at each of the landfills and collectively making gains in negotiating with the municipality and buyers
- the challenges the Network must still overcome.



## Background

The City of Tshwane is the administrative capital of South Africa. During apartheid, thirteen racially segregated municipal councils governed the Tshwane area. Today, it is now one municipality. As in cities across the country, Tshwane's unemployment rate today is very high. Close to forty percent of Tshwane's almost 2.4 million people are unemployed. Just over a quarter of people live in informal dwellings. In other words, there are many poor people here who cannot find steady work.

Almost three quarters of households have their waste removed by the city every week, and the waste ends up at one of seven municipally owned landfills, which are quickly filling up. Recently, some landfills have even closed. Reclaiming, then, is useful in two ways: it helps people who cannot find formal work earn money to survive, and it helps city landfills stay open longer by rerouting recyclable materials. This saves the city money.

The municipality, buyers, and reclaimers all use the positive term "reclaimer" to describe someone who extracts valuable and useful

items from landfills. When they speak in English, some reclaimers also call themselves "waste pickers" in order to identify with the growing national movement. Others call themselves "bagariesi," which they understand means "someone looking for something valuable," or "someone finding things that are useful." As one city official said, all of these terms suggest the importance of reclaiming work and the people who perform it: "these people are trained people and they do a very honest, hard days' work. I mean, you can't disgrace their value. And you need to have respect around this."

## Protest brings about change

The municipality, though, did not always see the benefits of the work reclaimers do. Until the mid 1990s, the Greater Pretoria Metropolitan Council gave contracts to private companies to do recycling on the landfills, and the reclaimers had to sell to these companies for low prices. When the contractor left, reclaimers were often banned from landfill sites and were forced to sneak through holes in fences to work before dawn and late at night. They were chased by

private security guards, and their reclaimed material was frequently burned by police, who considered it stolen goods.

The reclaimers, though, knew that change only happened when they “toyi-toyied” (protested). At the Hatherly landfill, for example, they asked the local African National Congress branch for support in gaining access to the landfill. They argued it was the only place they could make a living, and that Council should let them in to create jobs for themselves. They raised the money to buy logs, which they used to block the two gates to the dump. After two weeks of protest, the Council and the company (Company X) that managed the landfill negotiated with an elected team of reclaimers and members of the local ANC branch.

The Council and Company X decided to allow the reclaimers onto the landfill if they agreed to create a committee that would represent them and would enforce rules on how they would work on the site. The municipality also contracted Company X to visit other landfills, help form committees and train reclaimers in the rules developed at Hatherly.

### **Municipal projects: supporting reclaimers?**

Once reclaimers were working on all the landfills, the municipality, which did not have a formal recycling system, began to realize just how valuable reclaimers were. As the Head of Landfill Operations said: “while they are doing the recycling, they are also preventing you from landfilling air that is senseless. And the better they do, the better is your performance.”

Officials also realized that by allowing reclaimers to work at landfills, they were helping reach the Council’s goals of reducing poverty and creating employment. So, the municipality decided to “enhance these people and uplift them and assist them to be entrepreneurs and support themselves.” The opportunity to do this came when the National Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) gave the municipality money to link projects that dealt with waste management to job creation and poverty reduction.

### **Job creation**

The project first tried to create jobs by making new products out of recycled materials. Reclaimers working on landfills and local unemployed people were hired to make handbags out of plastic bags reclaimed from the dump. The cost of employing workers, however, was higher than the price of the handbags. On top of this, the plastic bags reclaimed from the dump were too dirty, so the project ended up buying new plastic bags from local supermarkets. This was even more expensive and did not make sense given that the project’s aim was to use recycled material. The project manager then turned to collecting, crushing and selling glass for recycling, but again, costs were higher than profits. These projects were abandoned, and people who had come to rely on the projects’ steady salaries and good working conditions were suddenly unemployed and without proper compensation.

### **Building buy-back centres, providing training**

The municipality soon decided that a better approach would be to support reclaimers in work they were already doing. Company X – the same company that had negotiated with the municipality to bring reclaimers onto landfills – presented a proposal. It argued reclaimers could get higher prices if they cleaned and sorted their materials properly. The company asked that the remaining money from DEAT be used to build buy-back centres at the landfills where reclaimers could sort and sell materials collectively for higher prices. Company X also said reclaimers should be given training on how to collect, sort, and clean materials, and should receive support on how to form cooperatives that could manage the buy-back centres. Company X received the contract to carry out this work.

While on paper these are very good ideas, Company X did not always hold the best interests of reclaimers in mind. It provided training that many reclaimers felt was not very useful. It also led reclaimers to believe it held more power over the project than it did, and many reclaimers reported they thought the company owned the buy-back centres. Reclaimers did not feel they could stand up

to this intimidation, reporting that they were told by Company X's manager they would be banned from the dump if they questioned him. Furthermore, though a cooperative was formed on paper, it never operated in reality.

Without proper training and support, it is no surprise that reclaimers were not able to successfully run the buy-back centres. The municipality decided it needed a company to help manage the centres, and at first, Company X was chosen for this task. However, Company X was a waste management company with ties to buying recyclables. Other companies objected to the arrangement because if Company X helped the reclaimers manage the buy-back centres, it would have too much control over prices and the buy-back market. When the municipality tried to stop this conflict of interest, however, it was not careful enough: another company (Company Y) with strong ties to Company X was awarded the contract. Company Y employed the same manager who had previously formed the committees and intimidated reclaimers.

The project soon fell apart as Companies X and Y used the reclaimers and buy-back centres for their own benefit. As one city official said, the companies had used a "guerrilla strategy:" "they wanted a monopoly of the landfills, purely to benefit from it. That means the reclaimers will just have to sell to them."

The reclaimers were very angry that a project meant to help them had put them under the control of a large company. They toyi-toyed at the municipal offices. Company X lost the contract to manage the Hatherly landfill, and the manager fled. Soon, buyers took over the buy-back centres. As the creation of the Network later proved, the municipality now wrongly believed that reclaimers could not run their own buy-back centres or cooperatives. The municipality said it had run out of ideas for helping them.

The municipality returned to seeing reclaimers as independent workers, but at least it allowed them to work on the landfills. It permitted reclaimers to build shelters for storage of their materials and to provide them with some relief from the heat and the rain. In one case, it allowed them to hire a security guard to protect

### Lessons and openings

There are many lessons to be learned from these first municipal attempts to engage with reclaimers, even if the projects ultimately failed:

- recycling projects cannot just focus on selling recyclables or products made from recyclables if they wish to provide secure, stable incomes for reclaimers
- because they perform a valuable service by saving airspace and extending the life of landfills, reclaimers should be compensated by the municipality
- if the municipality cannot or will not make reclaimers employees, or if the reclaimers prefer not to be employed, then the municipality should offer another fair sharing of wealth
  - in Diadema, Brazil, for example, reclaimer cooperatives are paid the same amount per tonne for recyclables that are redirected from landfills as waste disposal companies are paid to put waste in the landfill
- the municipality should protect and help grow democratic, reclaimer controlled cooperatives by bringing in these safeguards:
  - find truly independent organizations with experience in forming and developing cooperatives to support reclaimers
  - bring in recycling and waste industry experts only as required
  - put processes in place that allow workers to always grow in their ability to run cooperatives
  - pay greater attention to how reclaimers are organizing themselves
  - provide useful support as reclaimers develop organizations run for and by themselves.

their materials. In return, the municipality expected reclaimers to obey basic rules around safety and to pick up litter at the landfill site once a day. The reclaimers, on the other hand, said they were helping the city by removing recyclables from the landfills and that, as they were not employees, they should not

be expected to pick up litter. Although it still expected the reclaimers do cleaning work, the municipality agreed it did not see reclaimers as employees and refused to provide them with safety equipment such as overalls, gloves and safety shoes. This created a confusing and unfair situation for reclaimers.

## **Forming the Tshwane Network – creating independence**

As a result of the municipal projects, reclaimers took these important steps in their journey towards successful self-organizing:

- the opening up of regular access to the landfills
- the creation of reclaimer-run committees
- the beginning of relationships between landfill committees in joint meetings about the municipal projects
- the beginning of relationships between committees and buyers, and between committees and the municipality.

After the municipal project collapsed, the reclaimers continued to work in the landfill committees to try to improve their conditions. In 2009, the reclaimers formed a city-wide network of all the landfill committees. Within its first year alone, the Network had made these achievements:

- taking on buyers
- forming cooperatives
- sharing information and building organization
- creating a common front.

### **Network foundations: developing landfill committees**

The Network is made up of committee members from each of Tshwane's seven public landfills and one private landfill. These committees operate informally. They do not hold regular elections and do not have constitutions that clearly say what they do and how they do it. Still, they are powerful forces that have the support of most reclaimers on the landfills. Committees are generally made up the following way:

- they have eleven to sixteen members
- they have a chairperson, deputy chairperson, secretary, deputy secretary and treasurer
- they have an equal number of women and

men, although there are firm ideas of who can do what jobs

- they are usually chaired by older men because it is felt they command the authority to enforce decisions
- women serve as deputies or general members
- foreign workers tend to be left off committees.

Committee members reported many reasons why they agreed to serve on the committees:

- to bring order to the landfill
- to fight for rights and conditions
- to guard against corruption
- to act responsibly
- to gain new skills such as
  - working with others
  - speaking to large groups of people
  - improving English
  - gaining confidence when dealing with other authorities like children's schools.

Committees have established these key tasks:

- to create safe and orderly environments by tackling violence, theft, alcohol and drugs by
  - ensuring people don't steal or damage trucks coming to the landfill
  - preventing the harassment of women
  - hiring private security guards to protect materials at night
- to prevent new people from coming to work as reclaimers on to the landfills by threatening collective violence against newcomers, despite the fact they themselves had to struggle to gain entrance to the landfill. It should be noted that the reclaimers will need to reflect on the politics both of excluding newcomers and of using violence to do so
- to secure formal recognition from the municipality and to negotiate better working conditions
- to find new buyers, and to investigate and negotiate prices by
  - using creative methods, like taking down numbers from sides of trucks
  - sharing price information with other landfills, which allows reclaimers to negotiate with buyers.

### **Committees come together: forming the Network**

The need to improve reclaimers' price negotiations with buyers sparked the idea to

form the Tshwane Network. The Network organized around two key concerns:

- the drop in prices linked to the global economic crisis – the landfill committees wanted to know if prices were dropping at all landfills or only at theirs
- the way in which buyers paid different prices at different dumps and tried to play the reclaimers off against each other.

However, as the Network grows, it also discusses new ways to engage with the municipality as well as problems at specific dumps and how to resolve them. For example, when a male reclaimer continued to harass women after repeated landfill committee attempts to stop him, the Network held a debate and decided the man should no longer be allowed to work at the dump. The man packed his things and left. The Network, then, has developed clear authority to make and enforce decisions.

The Network meets once a month, and each meeting is held at a different landfill site so Network delegates can see the conditions and learn from experiences at each landfill and meet reclaimers who are not on committees. Reclaimers at each landfill contribute money to cover the costs of transport for their representatives, and the reclaimers at the host landfill contribute money and time to prepare snacks and lunch for the meeting delegates.

### **Taking on buyers**

In order to achieve its goals of getting buyers to increase prices and stop playing the landfills against each other, the Network has engaged buyers in a number of ways:

- through marketing and sharing information at Network meetings, reclaimers at different landfills have helped each other find new buyers
- the Network has tried to negotiate prices directly with the buyers as a collective by
  - establishing common prices it would accept
  - engaging buyers as a group in a meeting.

Reclaimers had seen their earnings drop large amounts due to the global economic crisis of 2008-2009 and had suffered the results, such as eviction, water and electricity cut-

offs, and having to withdraw their children from school because they could not pay the fees. So, the Network decided to challenge buyers on the prices they were offering. The Network hosted five of the largest buyers at the Tshwane landfills in a meeting. Here, the Network asked the buyers to explain the low prices and presented prices it felt were fair. When the buyers reacted badly to these prices, the Network then decided to accept the prices for the time being, but demanded the buyers go away and discuss how they could improve prices. Meanwhile, it would continue to look for new buyers who paid higher prices. As buyers can receive up to ninety percent of materials from the landfills, the Network's approach caused great concern among buyers.

By March 2010, the buyers still hadn't responded to the Network's demands, and the Network had not followed up with them. However, the Network's new way of working with buyers had several benefits:

- it changed the buyers' ideas about reclaimers
- it helped buyers take reclaimers more seriously as business and negotiating partners
- by forcing buyers to explain their change in prices, it helped reclaimers learn how their work fits into and is affected by the global economy
- when hearing the buyers say how little they valued the labour and costs of reclaiming work, reclaimers became even more firm in their belief that they needed to form cooperatives, buy vehicles and equipment, and start selling directly to manufacturers.

### **Forming cooperatives**

Reclaimers had worked together collectively on some occasions before they created the Tshwane Network and, at one landfill, had even tried to form their own cooperative. However, inspired by Network discussions about the power of organizing collectively and the possibility of removing the middlemen, reclaimers at Ondestepoort landfill took the steps needed to form a cooperative. They named the coop "Yebo Rekopane Recycling," meaning "Yes, We All Work Together Recycling." In January 2010, the cooperative had 66 members. The aim of the cooperative is to continue to buy material, and to begin to sell material, purchase a truck,

a bailing machine and a shelter with collected profit. The cooperative also hopes to open and make monthly deposits into accounts for each cooperative member. Currently, each reclaimer is paid based on the weight of materials that he or she supplies.

One of the greatest challenges faced by the cooperative is raising money for new activities. However, the cooperative is creative and resourceful in meeting these challenges. For example, it used Network contacts to supply a buyer with glass. Every cooperative member now collects glass and takes turns crushing it. They've used the profit from the first sale of glass to buy a scale and have started to buy plastic. They've employed one woman who is paid R50 a day to weigh the materials, which are then sold in bulk to a buyer. The next challenge is to buy transport, as renting a truck to take materials to buyers almost uses up the profit.

The committees at other landfills have been inspired by what they've seen at Ondestepoort, and all are now trying to do from their own cooperatives. They share information and ideas about how to build cooperatives at Network meetings. They also look to experiences of cooperatives formed in other cities, which they know about through the emerging South African National Waste Picker Network. Some of the Tshwane leadership dream of uniting cooperatives at all of the landfills into a city-wide cooperative that can get rid of middlemen.

### Sharing information

Some of the most important successes of the Network include sharing information, experience and expertise. The Network shares information in many ways:

- informally
- through meetings that engage allies like municipal officials, representatives of the Local Ward Committee and local political organizations
- through sharing the history of allies and reclaimers from across the city.

By sharing information in these ways, reclaimers learn how to solve common problems and how to use the authority of the Network to solve problems landfill committees cannot.

### Creating a common front

The Network's authority comes from its early commitment to developing a collective identity and a common basis for working together. It demonstrated this commitment by collectively creating a set of rules. These rules, listed below, take responsibility for how and in what conditions reclaimers work on landfills:

- preserve peace and unity on landfills
- secure the well being of reclaimers
- be loyal to the leaders and the reclaimers
- co-operate with one another in mutual trust and good faith and assist and support one another
- not direct cars, vehicles or trucks where to dispose
- not drink or gamble at landfills
- respect the status, institutions, powers and functions of leaders in other landfills
- not bring children to the landfills.

This important common identity also helps the Network engage with the municipality on behalf of all landfill reclaimers. The Network strongly believes the municipality should recognize and value reclaimers' contribution to the waste management program. In fact, the Network adopted this set of demands and presented it to the municipality:

- private landfills must be closed and all waste must come to municipal dumps
- municipal workers must not take recyclable and reusable materials before they enter the dump
- the municipality must buy the reclaimers nametags in recognition of their contribution to the waste management system, because if they were not working at the dumps, then the dumps would have been filled long ago
- the municipality must give them cameras so that they can take photos when people do incorrect things like dump medical waste
- the municipality must give them toilets as those provided are insufficient and dirty
- the municipality must ask people recycling at big firms to go and work at the dumps with reclaimers
- the municipality must stop people from visiting the dumps as they disturb the work of reclaimers and are often coming to see how much money the buyers and potentially rob them.

Although the municipality has not yet responded to these demands, reclaimers are confident the Network will continue to help them successfully engage with the municipality.

## Challenges to overcome

If the Network wishes to continue improving the working conditions and lives of reclaimers, it still must face a number of challenges:

- strengthen democratic structures at the landfills
  - develop constitutions, hold regular elections and open bank accounts to guard against corruption and lack of accountability
  - develop objectives, demands and strategies to strengthen and provide purpose and focus to the committees
  - represent everyone working at landfills; to successfully engage buyers and the municipality, reclaimers will have to overcome ethnic and national divisions at landfills
  - find ways to build solidarity with street reclaimers by bringing them into the Network so they can build a collective vision for how they think should be done and what their roles should be
  - find ways to negotiate and engage with new people who want to come and work on the landfills instead of resorting to violence
- build workable, sustainable democratic cooperatives
  - develop knowledge of state institutions that help support the formation of cooperatives
  - encourage these institutions to be more accessible and accountable
  - find assistance in learning to manage finances properly and developing a business plan
  - learn how to explain to others why it would benefit them to join the initiative

- build collective identity, vision and demands so that the work of the cooperative is grounded within a broader political vision that can unite members in a common goal
- strengthen the Network
  - support Network members financially when they miss work to attend meetings
  - take steps to learn how to follow through on actions and turn objectives into reality
  - use increasing understanding of how the municipality and the industry works to take the cause forward
  - find ways to make relationships and communication with the municipality formal and clear so reclaimers know what processes they can and should follow when they have ideas, problems, and suggestions
- make clear Network objectives and guiding principles
  - thoroughly debate long-term objectives and principles so Network can thrive and grow
  - create a shared political vision with short-term and long-term goals as well as strategies to achieve them.

## Conclusion

Since the apartheid era, Tshwane area reclaimers have proven they are resourceful and able to adapt, protest unfair conditions, and bring about positive change despite many obstacles. This skilfulness has resulted in the Network, an initiative created by reclaimers. As the Network continues to strengthen, there is hope the municipality will more fully and in more useful ways support the organization and development by the reclaimers. In this way, reclaimers can write new chapters of their story on their way to independence and inspire reclaimers both in South Africa and the world.

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