Selling materials on the street in Durban

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October 2021
Introduction: Buyers and buy back centres

Reclaimers sell the materials they have sorted in various ways. They may carry or drag their material to a buy back centre. Or a buyer may collect material from them at a sorting space somewhere in the city or at a landfill site. Or reclaimers may sell to an independent buyer who buys from many reclaimers and then on-sells this to a buy back centre.

Transport might be arranged by the buy back centre, reclaimers or buyers.

Reclaimers are usually paid in cash, but some receive payment into their bank account.

Reclaimers may sell their materials weekly, monthly, daily or even several times a single day. Whether reclaimers have a place to sort and store materials plays an important role in determining how often they sell.
In the early morning people are heading to the eThekwini inner city with bulging bags on their shoulders.
In the inner-city trucks are pulling up at various points. These are buyers. They will buy sorted waste from individual reclaimers. They will on sell the material to a buy back centre. The buyers unpack scales from the back of their trucks.
Some reclaimers are sorting waste on the sidewalk because they do not have a sorting and storage space of their own.
A reclamer uses a piece of fabric to secure a bale of cardboard. The scale operator weighs the cardboard. The bale weighs 6kg. It is loaded into the back of the truck.
Selling materials
The reclaimer is paid R12 in cash. The amount is recorded on a tabulated sheet. The buyers keep a plastic bag of cash on the bed of the truck. They don’t fear theft because they feel protected by the many reclaimers who depend on this payment.
The reclamer heads off with the plastics and cans he will take to another intermediary.
Reclaimers will keep bringing materials throughout the day.
Carrying materials to sell to a buyer.
One reclaimer may return with a new load of material to sell 4 or 5 times during the day.
Reclaimers deposit their plastics at the small shop front – a sort of hole-in-the-wall store along a narrow street that is lined with small fabric shops and former fabric shops now selling plastic home ware or take-out meals. This small buy back centre only buys plastics.
Some reclaimers sort and bag their plastics nearby, or carry already sorted material to the intermediary.
The intermediary weighs the loads and records the weights. Reclaimers are paid in cash.
There are also buy back centres that take a variety of materials.
Reclaimers will sell to different centres and buyers depending on what price is offered on the day. Sfundo Zungu’s bags have various items. He pauses at the bigger buy back centre in the Ethekwini CBD. The centre takes various materials. ‘I should scale here. This place will give me R10 for these cans and cardboards’ he says, ‘but I’ll go to the place that place around the corner, because they will give me about R14.’

He’s collecting in a first shift in order to get money for a meal. He says he earns between R50 and R80 a day.
The same transport arrangement occurs on city streets in many places. The cost to reclaimers for selling their materials includes transport and extra labour when they need help lifting and moving bags.