

Eva Mokoena



# Organising

## Eva Mokoena

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### The ARO truck

A few reclaimers participating in the Brixton-Auckland Park pilot project are either sorting materials on the side of the road or sitting in small groups talking with one another. Suddenly the slow start to the morning shifts gear. Everyone looks up. A large white panelled truck emblazoned with the green ARO logo announcing Reclaiming the Future pulls up. Its confident big truck body language defies all notions that this work is marginal.

The logos of UNIDO and the Japanese government that also decorate the side panel speak of a project that is supported and has international recognition.

Three uniformed ARO reclaimers climb out of the cabin. They are part of ARO's organising team, a group of reclaimers who, in addition to their reclaiming work, go to new areas to organise reclaimers, support other reclaimers to solve problems they encounter, and perform a wide range of other tasks to build the organisation. There's chatter and greetings as the back of the truck is opened and the heavy-duty industrial scale is hauled to the sidewalk. The woman who lives at Number 100 – the pretty house with the lacy railings – has already thread the extension cord through the drainage pipe in the wall and Eva Mokoena plugs in the scale's gauge and readies her notebook to

begin recording the mass of recyclables collected that day. Other ARO organisers from the truck hand out additional canvas bags or confer with reclaimers.

This morning the ARO truck will also collect surplus recyclables from streets that have already been worked by reclaimers and collect recyclables from Bordeaux, a neighbourhood where ARO has made arrangements with the residents association to provide a weekly collection service. The materials collected on the truck will be sorted at one of two inner city sites. The reclaimer organisers who work on the truck can sell these materials to earn income. The truck will return later to collect the scale and organisers who are working here today. For now, it leaves to 'sweep' the streets elsewhere. It pulls off, announcing 'Recycling with Reclaimers' on its rear door.

### Organising work

Eva Mokoena is working on the truck and weighing materials today as part of her tasks as a member of ARO's Organising Team. She is the Chairperson of the organisation. She does organising work for ARO

twice a week. But she may be called at any time to do other work. Her duties include assisting with the weighing of materials as she has today, dealing with complaints (especially if any women are not being treated unfairly she notes), negotiating with the municipality when reclaimers are threatened with eviction, briefing lawyers, brokering agreements between different groups of reclaimers, and addressing groups of reclaimers or residents. Eva is not daunted by her work as chairperson of ARO. 'Let me put it like this' she says. 'I'm a tigress, a fighter. I like people to respect each other, no matter who they are. I won't see anyone getting bullied.'

She laughs: 'actually I do like this work' she says. 'What I've noticed about this work is, it gives you time, strength and courage. And builds your self-esteem. If I didn't work as a reclaimer I would never have built the courage to leave an abusive relationship or fight for my rights or other people's rights. I would not have learnt the skill I have to talk to anyone or to talk to academics or to talk in front of a crowd of 300 or 400 people. Or have worked with ARO who has already won three big awards.'





### **The scale**

Eva makes sure the scale is working. Reclaimers who up to now have been trickling up the road and leaning against their loads or sitting in pairs talking or smoking now form a procession with their overflowing bags. Men wearing balaclavas (one with a pompom), or football caps, or bucket hat in various shades, or threadbare beanies. Some sport dreadlocks. Or light beards. There are young faces and scarred faces. And there are women who are dressed in ARO uniforms or not, some wearing blankets around their waists. Footwear is mostly hardy – strong rain boots or trainers (that one reclaimer calls his 'brake pads' in reference to how reclaimers lock their shoes to skid to a halt or to slow down when 'riding' their trolleys downhill). One by one the bags are weighed.

It takes two people to heave each bag from the reclaimers' trolleys - that are fashioned from shopping cart bases onto the scale. The weighing process is systematic. Reclaimers help each other to heave the large bags onto the scale, Edwin Thai spells his name for Eva who notes the weight of his load (110kg) in her exercise book. In this way Eva notes the mass of each bag. And the bags are efficiently, if awkwardly, heaved back onto the trolleys. Then reclaimers move off up the hill and towards the inner city.

### **Living far from home but close to work**

When there is a lull Eva takes a break before the next group of reclaimers comes along the road. She packs some nature and home improvement magazines into her backpack before she sits on low wooden railing alongside the park. 'I don't ever leave magazines behind'. She says 'sometimes reclaimers bring me magazines. They know I want them for my kids, for school projects'. Does she get other things from other reclaimers? 'Yes. In January Anna gave me two blankets, a resident gave them to her and she didn't need them, but I was sleeping where I am sorting, at a squatter camp in Village Main, and I needed blankets'. Eva is still staying at the small informal settlement on weeknights. She goes home to her three children in Orange Farm on weekends. She explains 'I'm staying here to be close to my work. The transport costs would be R450 a week if I stayed in Orange Farm'. She says 'It's not possible to bring the children to town with me. Life is too fast here and too expensive. If you bring your kids here, they have to attend a private school.' She says she has no choice, even though it's hard to be away from her children. Of their schooling

she says, 'The kids are at school on different days, you know how it is with COVID, school days are staggered' she says. She adds, 'But anyway these days it's up to the kids if they are going to learn. Teachers are not caring or helping them.'

### **Working on a landfill site**

Eva works at a private landfill site in Germiston. 'It's like this', she says, 'Trucks come and offload. Then we pick up. The stuff we don't take gets pushed aside into the landfill by the front end loader'. If the landfill is not pressurised, if too many trucks don't arrive at the same time, then everyone gets a chance to take salvage recyclables before the loader pushes it into the landfill. But on busy days drivers are under time pressure and must push the waste as quickly as possible to make space for the next load. Eva says still this is not a big problem because reclaimers can pull materials from the compacted waste. 'I fill a 300kg bag every day that I work at the site.' How does she move the bag? 'I climb into the bag to stamp the waste into the corners to make the sides of the bag round. When it's full I tie it with rope. Then I roll it down the side of the landfill'. These days she is at the landfill three or four days a week, including Saturdays. She also needs time to sort the materials she collects.

### **Eva collects most categories of material:**

Many kinds of plastics (including LD, PP, HD, PP, and PET), cardboard, heavy steel, light steel, copper, brass, and aluminium. She sorts the materials into separate bags. When she has enough material she takes the bags on her trolley to a buy-back centre. She knows the material well and knows this work very well.

### **Ambition**

Eva's been doing this work since she was eleven years old and joined her mother after school every day at the Matiki landfill site in Palm Springs. At the age of 17 other reclaimers made her the leader of the site. After she matriculated she was the head of communications for a nursery school, but later she left that job and returned to the landfill site and to organising work with reclaimers. Eva says, 'My mom did this work until she was 70. I don't want that. I want to build an organisation where reclaimers can learn and grow. Where they can get skills, expand their knowledge, where our kids can go to school, where we can be empowered...'

