Reclaim Revalue Reframe

Refiloe Sephiri

Sfundo Zungu
The work – collecting clean materials
A big focus of reclaiming by informal independent reclaimers in eThekwini is on retrieving clean material from hotels and from retailers and industry. This includes cardboard, plastics, paper, glass bottles and cans. People access the material ‘through the back door’. They often set up relationships with managers or security guards who reserve material from them. They may visit the same shop or hotel several times in a single day.

Intermediaries
The role of intermediaries in eThekwini is pronounced and is very evident in the inner city where there are an estimated 400 active reclaimers. There are several companies who move recyclable materials from the reclaimers to recycling companies. Typically, trucks park on the roadside in dense areas such as the inner city. Reclaimers can bring any amount of salvaged material to them – the trucks deal in a single material (e.g. cardboard) and reclaimers are paid in cash on the spot.

One such truck with caged sides pulls up in front of a fashion store in the inner city of eThekwini. But its business is not with the store. This truck’s markings identify it as belonging to iTheka Recycling Group. It is here to collect recyclable materials and its business is with the reclaimers, a few of whom have already set up a space on the sidewalk in anticipation of the truck’s arrival. The reclaimers are sorting cardboard, plastics and cans into separate piles and bags. This truck will only take cardboard and so boxes are being flattened and stacked.

On the truck the intermediary’s operators are setting up for the morning shift. They are checking the hook-like scale and monitor. Sibongiseni Gina shakes the monitor. It needs new batteries. Someone is sent to get one. Meanwhile he readies the bag of cash. It’s a simple plastic bag, heavy with loose coins. He places it near the back of the truck. Won’t it be stolen? “No”, he laughs, ‘No one’s going to take this money while all these reclaimers who depend on it are around. It’s protected by so many people!’

iTheka Recycling Group weighs and bales the material and takes it to Planet Care (http://www.planetcare.co.za/) which is a waste management organisation that collects waste, recycles waste, promotes small enterprise in waste management services and builds partnerships to promote waste recycling.

Reclaimers arrive at the truck with small or larger bundles. Once they have weighed their cardboard and it has been piled into the back of the truck they rearrange their other material, plastic and cans, in bags slung over their shoulders, and walk on towards the other small depots in the CBD. iTheka’s truck will fill within three hours. And when it leaves another truck will arrive. It could fill up to 5 truckloads of materials at this one place in the CBD each weekday. And there are other trucks belonging to other companies doing the same work on other roads nearby.

Refiloe Sephiri – living and working on eThekwini streets
A small built woman is balancing a substantial load over her head. She’s also carrying a blue duffel bag over her shoulder. She silently hangs the load on the scale – 19.5 Kg. She takes the R40 from the operator. As she turns to go, Misiwe Maphumulo, a social worker from the NGO Asiye e’Tafuleni that works with reclaimers in Durban, steps forward to ask if she can speak with her. She asks about her living circumstances, where she’s from and how she works, and she tells her about the Palmer Street facility. The reclaimer - Refiloe Sephiri - comes from the North West. She came to Durban after her mother died and she was suffering and unable to feed herself. She had first tried to make a living in Johannesburg. She lived on the street there. But it was unsafe, and she came to Durban hoping for a safer place. She says she lives alone on the street. Her bag contains her
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Reclaimer profile

At night she looks for places to sleep where she is close enough to groups of people to feel safe. But she’s forever scared. Refiloe says there is a business that keeps materials for her. She also comes to the truck to weigh goods several times a day. We will see her again with the group of reclaimers who shelter near the plastics buy back facility down a side road.

Addiction

Reclaimers are resting against a wall. Some are eating. A few are staring blankly. One is pulling a large black plastic bag over his head and trunk, to create the hood under which he will inhale the fumes of the Nyoape tablet he is setting a flame to. One pill costs R40 on this street. It’s the same rand value as 10kg of plastic.

Sfundo Zungu

A young man walks up to us. He’s curious about the small group of researchers and the photographer standing on the street. His bags have various items. He expects to get about R6 for the cardboard, R4 for the cans and R8 for the plastics he has. He deposes his plastics at the small shop front – a sort of hole in the wall store along this narrow street that is lined with small fabric shops and shops that must have been fabric shops in a previous era but are now selling plastic home ware or take-out meals to few customers. “But I’ll go collect again today” he says. 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.

Precarious living

Sfundo Zungu is 20 years old. He grew up in a children’s home. He didn’t know his family, but someone told him his father was in Durban. He ran away from the home to search for his father. Although a woman with the same surname wanted to help him, he never found his father. Now he says he lives on the streets and does reclaiming. His daily challenge is to avoid drugs and violence. ‘A lot of people try to take advantage of us, they take our stuff,’ he says of the youth who do this work. There is an NGO – TB HIV Care – that does social development work. ‘They want to help me. I do attend there,’ he says. He pauses at the buy back centre that 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 that place around the corner, because they will give me about R14.’ He asks for his photo to be printed and kept at Palmer Street for him to collect. “I don’t have even have one photo of myself,” he says.

AeT social worker Misiwe Maphumulo reflects on the informal workers she assists. She says a lot of the assistance involves connecting people to social services or to their families. AeT has managed to assist people. And there are a number of good NGOs to which people can be referred. Some of the most complicated cases involve assisting internal migrants. Many state social services operate at provincial levels and it’s not easy to deal with a service that it located in another province for a person who comes from Eastern Cape for instance.