

Sibongile Muthwa



Professionalizing reclaiming with high quality working space, equipment and organized collections and sales

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October 2021

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Palmer Street Recycling Facility

Sibongile Muthwa is standing inside the cage she uses to store her cart and plastics at Palmer Street Recycling Facility. She is surrounded by plastics and wrapped in plastic...she's protected her clothing while she sorts by wrapping a layer of plastic around her waist. Her uniform of an apron and hat that indicates she's part of the Friends of Recyclers team offer further protection. Sibongile is working inside the recently opened Palmer Street Recycling Facility.

Asiye eTafuleni (AeT)

It is a facility that has been created through the joint efforts of an NGO and the City. Asiye eTafuleni (AeT) is an NGO that works alongside informal workers who use public spaces for their livelihoods, including wood sellers, recyclers, water providers and others. In AeT's work with informal workers and waste recyclers particularly, they have responded to the prejudiced and disrespectful treatment that street recyclers are subject to.

Negative treatment of reclaimers

Despite being responsible for 150 tons of recycled material daily in Durban, the negative perceptions remain. For women recyclers in particular, exploitation and harassment are often extreme. Inner city recyclers are overly policed and the police have an unsympathetic attitude towards informal workers. The police have regular clean up missions and residents have bad attitudes towards recyclers. Reclaimers are at times exploited by businesses – who may require them to offload goods or do other 'free labour' tasks in exchange for materials.

Establishing the facility and upgrading an inner city park AeT, in partnership with eThekweni Municipality and other actors, have created a recycling facility in Palmer Street, the intention of which has been to create a safe working environment for recyclers.

From collecting at home to working in a formal facility Sibongile has collected recyclable material since 2015. She lives in Illovo Township with her 5 children and 2 grandchildren. "In our township I saw other women collecting plastics and cardboard and storing them in their house. I asked someone, because I needed money. She told me about Very Green. She introduced me to them and I registered. After that they would collect from me monthly and would deposit my money into the bank.

"I did that work until I decided to come to Palmer Street. I came here because my friend told me about this place. I still collect at home on the weekends. But now I come here in the week. People store plastics

and cardboard for me and I collect and bring it here to sort. I go to a business that sells car parts, and to a big shop and to other businesses and bring the plastics here. There is a hotel that calls us to collect from them. And we usually sell from here on a Thursday", she says.

Prices

What prices are the materials fetching at Palmer Street? "Wrapping plastics – R3/kg; Clear plastic – R6/kg; coloured plastics – R5/kg; cans – R17/kg and cardboard – R1.50/kg," she says.

Benefits

The benefits of the facility include: the provision of a professional environment with a safe space, the possibility of increasing recyclable materials and provision of a space for organizing. It is an empowering model. The reclaimers can determine the price at which they want to sell and call intermediaries who meet their price.

Sibongile says the facility works well for her. It's good to have space to sort her materials. And to be able to store material and equipment safely. She is able to sell weekly from Palmer Street, rather than monthly as she was doing at home. And she earns as much in a week as she was earning in a month. She feels safe in the facility and appreciates that Parks Department looks after the facility and park. It's a clean and pleasant environment. She says her work with other women, under the banner of Friends of Recyclers and with their uniforms and ID cards and formal place to work feels like a business.