



Simon Ramohlakne

Sorting 'clean' materials in a democratic cooperative

Simon Ramohlokane

October 2021

Text: Tanya Zack, Kirsten Harrison, Melanie Samson

Photographs: Mark Lewis

Design: Willemijn Schellekens

Working at a landfill

Simon Ramohlokane is 38. He was born on a farm and came to Sasolburg as a small child. He completed Grade 9. But he left school because his mother was struggling to support the family. In 1998 he went to the landfill site to try to get work there. He was allowed onto the site and started collecting cardboard. He would sell the materials to buy-back centres in Sasolburg. The prices for cardboard were very low. He would sometimes make R12 in a day. Simon says, 'I worked there until we made a plan to come here and start this centre.' He talks of working with others to establish cooperative and work differently. Working at the landfill was tough work. He had to run fast to scramble to get material from the truck. And the work was extremely dirty. 'The plastics and cardboard were usually mixed and messed up' he says. He adds that people sometimes stole the materials he had collected. And there was no water for cleaning or drinking. He also had to stockpile and sell his material once a week. And it was difficult to secure a place to stockpile. He would sleep with his materials in order to keep them safe.

Forming a cooperative and starting The Vaal Park project

When Simon Mbata approached him about forming a cooperative and about working in a different model, he was keen. 'I said if I can work differently, maybe life will be better', he adds.

The project that was born out of those early ideas about working differently, more cooperatively, and in a cleaner facility. It was a partnership between SAWPA and the Packaging Council of South Africa (PACSA, now known as Packaging SA). It is coordinated by the Ikageng-Ditamating (ID) cooperative.

The Vaal Park project began as a pilot for PACSA when they were developing a draft Industry Waste Management Plan in 2011, as well as a pilot for SAWPA. Infrastructure and equipment were donated by several levels of government, companies, and industry associations. This included: land allocated for recycling, trucks, trolleys and bins provided for the waste collection. The Vaal Park project officially launched in 2014. It entailed the provision of wheelie bins to 3000 households. Each household has a bin for recyclables and another for non-recyclables. Working together, the reclaimers, collect, sort and bail the material at the Vaal Park recycling centre. In addition residents bring recyclable materials to the centre.

After three years, the programme had achieved some successes, including that two thirds of households in Vaal Park recycle and participate in the S@S programme. The ID cooperative has also generated extra income by selling recyclables that are dropped off by





community members and through the provision of collection services to private businesses .

The significance of the Vaal Park pilot is that it represents the first time waste picker integration had been tried between waste pickers, government and private industry.

Sorting and baling at the recycling centre

Simon's work at the Vaal Park Recycling Centre involves sorting materials and baling.

First, I sort what we can sell. Then I feed the cardboard into the baling machine. I earn less here than I earned at the landfill site. But the work is much better. We work well together; the work is clean and we work for a purpose. And there is no fighting here. I was tired of the stress of fighting at the landfill site. A big problem there is that there is a lot of alcohol available. And men working together who spend their money on alcohol easily. I am much calmer here. Since working here I have a plan. I put money in the bank.

Saving for a home

Simon lives in a four-roomed shack that he has built on the edge of Zamdela 12 years ago. He hopes this informal settlement will be earmarked for formal township development. He would like to improve the shack and to build a formal house. But he cannot do that unless the municipality recognizes the settlement and gives people secure tenure there. In the meantime he is saving his money at Standard Bank. He's saving about R300 every month. The rest of his income goes to food, clothing and sometimes furniture.

Simon left his mother's RDP house provided by the government as part of its post-apartheid housing policy in order to set up independently. His wife died some years ago and his 3 children live with his mother, but they visit his home every day. It is a home that he constructed almost entirely from found materials. He says even the items inside the home were mostly found. He has found discarded computer screens, a safe, DVDs, a TV, radio and furniture items. 'One day I will build my house,' he says.

