Health and Safety
Reclaiming is physically taxing and hazardous work

Reclaimers undertake hard physical labour in unsanitary and hazardous contexts and are exposed to significant health risks.

IF YOU DON’T KNOW, NOW YOU KNOW

Health hazards reclaimers encounter during the day include:

- being injured or killed by trucks at landfills, as well as cars and other vehicles on the roads;
- exposure to gases and smoke from the burning of waste, including electronic waste burned to extract metals;
- contact with hazardous waste and chemicals;
- contact with dead babies and foetuses;
- contact with faecal matter;
- having limited access to shelter and protection from the elements;
- having limited access to clean drinking water and ablution facilities;
- sustaining burns and cuts from waste materials;
- risk of HIV infection and hepatitis B and C from medical waste not properly disposed;
- sustaining musculoskeletal damage from pushing and carrying heavy loads;
- exposure to bio-aerosols and volatile compounds;
- exposure to COVID-19 through improperly disposed medical waste.

Due to the highly physical nature of reclaimers’ work, their typically inadequate access to health care, and their lack of coverage by health and safety legislation, poor health can have profoundly negative consequences on their ability to work and generate an income.

Reclaimers often endure unhealthy living conditions

Reclaimers’ health is also affected by their living conditions.

A study of reclaimers working at nine landfill sites across South Africa found that 60% lived at landfill sites or in informal structures in the veld or the bush. Half did not have access to ablution facilities.

In addition, reclaimers often have to bring waste home because they have no safe places to store or sort the materials they collect.
Sorting materials at home exposes all family members to health risks.

By storing the materials at their homes, reclaimers are tackling a big problem for municipalities and industry because in order for materials to be cleaned and properly sorted before being sold, they need to be stored somewhere for a few days. If reclaimers didn’t find creative ways to store these materials, they would all end up at the landfill.

But this should not be done at risk of reclaimers’ and their households’ health. This is why it is very important for integration to include providing reclaimers with sorting and storage spaces.
Reclaimers are at risk of mental health disorders
In one Johannesburg study 37.5% of reclaimers surveyed reported common mental health disorders, which was more than twice the rate in the general South African population. Women reclaimers in Johannesburg were more likely to report common mental health disorders than their male counterparts.

Separation at source that excludes reclaimers harms their health
It is important to note that separation at source projects that do not include reclaimers have negative effects for reclaimers’ working conditions and health. This is because reclaimers often have to sleep rough to get access to materials. They must also work very quickly, and they earn less income when these programmes do not integrate them. This means their nutrition and ability to seek medical help may be compromised. When reclaimers are not recognised as legitimate role-players in the waste management cycle they can be subject to hostility and even physical assault.

How health and safety can be addressed in waste picker integration
Clearly, reclaimers cannot continue to sacrifice their health to collect our recyclables. Integration programmes should include initiatives to eliminate the health hazards that reclaimers confront, create a healthier work environment, and improve their health.

A few possible ideas to address health and safety include providing:
- access to storage and sorting spaces located in areas convenient for reclaimers,
- shelter for reclaimers working at landfills,
- personal protective equipment,
- mobile clinics for reclaimers,
- access to ablution facilities,
- secure access to materials so that reclaimers do not need to sleep rough,
- access to clean materials through separation at source programmes
- medical aid kits provided to hubs of reclaimers
- special COVID-19 vaccination sites and dates for reclaimers,
- ensuring medical waste is not disposed at landfills not licenced to receive them,
- mapping and addressing waste pickers’ health risks,
- vaccinating reclaimers against infectious diseases,
- health and safety training
- providing regular medical check-ups
- providing personal protective equipment (PPE)
- provision of mental health services.

The health and safety risks that reclaimers face vary from circumstance to circumstance. The reclaimers in a particular area should identify their priority health concerns that should be addressed first in integration programmes.

All separation at source projects should take the effects on reclaimers health into consideration and reduce, rather than increase the health hazards they confront.
ACTIVITY:
One way to increase municipal and industry officials’ understanding of the health hazards faced by reclaimers is to spend a day working with them.

References
