Who are Reclaimers?

Reclaimers are people who earn their living by salvaging recyclable materials from waste, transporting, cleaning, and sorting the materials, and then selling them to be used by industry to make new products.

Reclaimers also salvage items that they can use in their own homes, give away, use to make something new, or sell to others.
Reclaimers salvage recyclables at landfills, from rubbish bins put out by residents and businesses, and in commercial areas and public spaces. They also collect recyclables from office buildings, apartment complexes, gate communities, office parks, and other private spaces if they reach agreements with people who can give them access.

Differences between reclaimers
Although we talk about “reclaimers”, they are not all the same. Reclaimers can be women or men, South African or from other countries, old or young. While many reclaimers have a low level of education, there are also professionals such as teachers and electricians, and students who were forced to leave university because they could not pay their fees.

See the section of the Reclaim, Revalue, Reframe website on Gender and Waste Picking to learn more about the specific challenges women reclaimers encounter, the power inequalities between them, and some actions to take to promote gender equity.

One thing that almost all reclaimers in South Africa have in common is that they are black. Colonialism, apartheid, and racial capitalism exploited and oppressed black people and ensured that race and class are linked. Because of this history and the failure to transform it in the present, the overwhelming majority of people who work as reclaimers are African. There are also Indian and coloured reclaimers who frequently work in suburbs, commercial zones, public spaces, and landfills close to areas where they were forced to live during apartheid and where they still live in the present.
What is the difference between reclaimers and waste pickers?

There is no difference between a waste picker and a reclaimer. These are different terms used for people who earn a living by selling materials that they salvage from rubbish. There are many other terms that are used in other parts of the world. The two most common terms in English that are used in South Africa are waste picker and reclaimer.

‘Waste picker’ highlights that the people who do this work need to dig around in waste, something most people are not willing to do and is a key reason why so many negative, incorrect assumptions are made about reclaimers and why they are treated unfairly.

‘Reclaimer’ highlights that the people who do this work create value by salvaging materials that can be recycled, reused, and remade; make important contributions to the economy and environment; and are building something new.

The Reclaim, Revalue, Reframe website and materials use both terms.

How many reclaimers work in South Africa?

No one knows exactly how many reclaimers there are in South Africa. Estimates range from 60 000 to as many as 215 000.

Reclaiming exists at such a large scale in South Africa because of our exceptionally high levels of unemployment and inequality. This is because reclaiming depends on some people being so wealthy that they throw away materials that still have value, and other people being so poor that they are willing to dig through trash to earn a living.

- In early 2022, 46.6% of South Africans of working age were unemployed (including those who gave up looking for a job)
- In 2022 South Africa was the most unequal country in the world.

ACTIVITY:
- Do reclaimers salvage materials from garbage bins where you live?
- If they do, what do they take? Do you talk to them?
- Have you seen more or fewer reclaimers in recent years? What trends do you notice?
- What do you know about the reclaimers in your municipal area?
- What kinds of contributions do you think reclaimers make?
Reclaiming takes a lot of hard work and knowledge.
Reclaimers need to figure out where they can work and negotiate access, often from other reclaimers who already work there and from residents, security guards, and landfill management.

Reclaimers must learn which materials earn the highest prices, which are the easiest to collect, how to tell the difference between different recyclables, how to salvage them, how to prepare them for sale, how to find the best places to sell different materials, and how to transport them to be sold.

Reclaimers also have to find safe places to store and sort their materials, and they need to learn how to sort properly.

If reclaimers sell items other than recyclables, they need to figure out where to sell them and may need to learn how to transform them into new items.

Then they need to do all of this work.
Learn more about reclaimers’ daily work and lives from the following resources on the Reclaim, Revalue, Reframe website: videos of the daily lives of landfill and street reclaimers, photo stories, and reclaimer profiles.

**TIP**
Do reclaimers have a system to collect recyclables?

Long before municipalities became interested in recycling, reclaimers realised that valuable materials were being thrown away and that they could earn an income by taking them out of the waste stream and selling them.

So, reclaimers started separating recyclables out of residents’ trash bins that they put out for collection and disposal.

When municipalities ask residents to separate their recyclables from their trash and put them in bags to be collected separately from rubbish, this is called separation at source or S@S.

Figure 1: Separation outside Source (SoS) [Source Samson, Seegers and van den Bussche, 2019]
Because reclaimers separate recyclables from people’s trash after they have put their trash out to be collected, this is called **separation outside source or SoS**.

**Figure 1** provides a simple overview of the SoS system. It shows reclaimers extracting recyclables from residents’ waste in two key places: 1) rubbish bins placed outside of people’s homes and 2) landfills. The reclaimers then earn an income by selling their recyclables to buy back centres or other buyers and the materials enter into the global recycling value chain.

**Figure 1** shows that rather than working as isolated individuals, reclaimers are part of a system to collect recyclables and that this system is connected to the official waste management system.

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**How are reclaimers compensated?**

Reclaimers sell the recyclables that they collect to buyers (which are usually small buyback centres) that sell to larger recycling companies. Reclaimers receive a different price for each specific material, and only receive a very small portion of the value of the materials that they sell. These prices fluctuate based on changes in the market and some are so low that reclaimers do not waste time collecting those materials.

Unlike private companies, currently reclaimers are not paid for the collection and environmental services that they provide. After many years of struggle by reclaimers, South Africa’s Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) regulations now require industry to start paying reclaimers a service fee. However, the formula for the fee and the amount must still be negotiated, so it is not clear how much the payments will do to end the exploitation of reclaimers.