Seven Steps for implementing waste picker integration

Kick-starting Integration

There are practical ways to support waste pickers while municipalities and waste pickers work together in a Waste Picker Integration Working Group to develop the Waste Picker Integration Plan.

If waste pickers prioritise integration needs that can be met with existing resources or reallocation of existing resources, there is no need to wait!!

Any efforts to kick-start integration must comply with the Waste Picker Integration Principles. They cannot be done by municipalities working alone and must be done in partnership with reclaimers.

Here are ten ideas for kick-starting integration:

1. End harassment
2. Remove waste from sorting spaces
3. Hold meetings between reclaimers and officials
4. Participate in immersion exchanges
5. Increase access to officials
6. Identify and address key daily problems
7. Register reclaimers
8. Integrate landfill reclaimers
9. Educate residents to increase access to recyclables
10. Provide access to land and infrastructure
A FEW KICK-STARTING TIPS

Municipalities, industries and waste pickers in different contexts have different needs and priorities. Each has their own contexts within which to develop a waste picker integration plan.

‘Every municipality needs to work out what’s going to work best for them. And with the reclaimers. I think it’s not necessarily going to be a blueprint. I think that’s why it’s important that they need to see what is there, what is not there’

(Academic, interviewed 2021)

Waste picker integration programmes take time and commitment.

‘Waste picker integration is obviously a massive elephant that needs to be eaten piece by piece because we are now stepping into a whole new domain’

(Former Municipal Official, interviewed 2021)

Integration is not something that can be done for reclaimers, if must be done with reclaimers.

‘Many municipalities are trying to determine what’s good for pickers without consulting them. And this will actually fail. I think one of the key things that comes to light is just that municipalities don’t recognize the fact that pickers want to work within their own sort of hours and structures. And by partnering them with a consultant or with a service provider, all of that’s now gone. They need to pick what they want to pick, not what they get told to pick up’

(Former Municipal Official, interviewed 2021)

It’s something that reclaimers need to play a lead role in doing together with municipalities, industry, corporates and other parties in the sector.

1. End harassment

Reclaimers experience harassment while doing their work.

An important intervention from municipal officials is instructing police and metro police not to harass reclaimers or confiscate their materials.

Reclaimers speak about the harassment they experience both from police and private security personnel, and also from residents in some neighbourhoods.
Seven Steps for Waste Picker Integration

Step 2: Partner

1. Municipal waste departments should provide skips and collect waste where reclaimers sort so that waste that is not recyclable can be removed to landfill.

2. Remove waste from sorting spaces

Metro Police and private security companies burned not only materials but people’s clothes, money, you know, because reclaimers work in cash and a lot of them, if you earn money, and you need to save it so that you can send it home, it’s most likely to be somewhere in the vicinity of where you sleep. And that’s what happened. In many cases, the police would come in, burn people’s material. And inevitably, people lost a lot of money in the process together with clothes, food, everything’

(ARO Organizer, 2021).

‘There many false assumptions, stereotypes, denigrating attitudes towards reclamer... it’s not going to be easy.’

(Academic, 2021)
3. Hold meetings between municipalities and waste picker

Municipalities should set up meetings between waste pickers and different departments and units of the municipality to let them know their work is acknowledged and valued, and to hear their challenges and concerns.

“I think its very important that there is a philosophy around how municipalities and reclaimers deal with each other; how to respect each other. It’s not a top-down relationship. You’re not going to tell reclaimers what they should do, it should be a participatory process. So I think the whole philosophy behind what the integration needs to be and should be participatory and it’s going to take a paradigm shift.”

(Academic, interviewed 2021)

“So, it’s for us - integration was really understanding how other people in the waste sector work, how we would teach them how we work, and be able to formulate a way that would be able to be beneficial to both parties.”

(Reclaimer, interviewed 2021)

In order to facilitate meeting up, municipalities should engage with organized waste picker/reclaimer groups. If there are no organisations, municipal officials can ask organisations in other areas, NGOs, academics, other local organisations to assist them to meet and engage reclaimers and start meeting with them.

4. Participate in immersion exchanges

Officials and waste pickers have very little understanding of what the other does, the challenges they face, the constraints they work under and how decisions are made in the other’s organisation.

This needs to change if they are going to work together effectively.

A great way to do this is through immersion exchanges in which municipal officials spend a few days working with reclaimers and reclaimers spend a few days working with municipal officials.
5. Increase access to officials

Municipal officials should be accessible to reclaimers. A point of contact should be provided for reclaimers within the municipality.

“Well, yes, we actually have engaged with them. We were supposed to have a meeting with them a month back, and they did not send the dates for the meeting. We were supposed to be looking at the terms and references of how we go to working together. It sounds very interesting. But that’s the very same thing they’ve been saying for the past five years. It’s not really interesting.’

(Reclaimer, 2021)

Reclaimers should be able to share the challenges they face engaging municipal officials and the municipality should work to addresses these. [eg. identifying whom reclaimers should talk to, times when they can meet the person etc.]

‘Firstly, communication is the key. Because as a municipality member, because if you are deciding to implement anything for waste pickers, we normally say nothing for us without us’

(Reclaimer, interviewed 2021)

Accessibility is important for building trust and ensuring ongoing communication.
Municipalities are required by law to run well-managed landfill sites. However, most landfill sites don’t meet legislative requirements and are not properly managed. Furthermore, many landfill sites are almost full and there is limited available land for new landfills.

**LET’S TALK ABOUT YOUR CONTEXT:**
In your municipality, who can reclaimers approach?

What experience do reclaimers have with municipal officials and their accessibility?

**6. Identify and address key daily problems**

Meetings with reclaimers and municipalities to identify other key daily problems and work together to address these.

**Take a look at tool 4:** Addressing some typical problems and challenges faced by municipalities, industry and waste pickers.

**7. Register reclaimers**

Ensure reclaimers are registered on the South Africa Waste Picker Registration System (SAWPRS). See **Step 3** in the section of this website on the Seven Steps for Waste Picker Integration for more information on the SAWPRS.

**8. Integrate landfill reclaimers**

Municipalities are required by law to run well-managed landfill sites. However, most landfill sites don’t meet legislative requirements and are not properly managed. Furthermore, many landfill sites are almost full and there is limited available land for new landfills.
Nevertheless, on many landfill sites, municipalities try to exclude reclaimers through access control. When reclaimers do work on landfill sites, they are exposed to health and safety risks. There are instances of violence on landfill sites which need to be managed.

Municipalities can assist reclaimers by allowing them to safely salvage materials from landfills before they are covered. The case study on “Integrating Landfill Waste Pickers” provides some examples of how this can be done.

WAYS TO INTEGRATE LANDFILL RECLAIMERS:
• Reach agreement with landfill reclaimers that enables them to salvage while minimizing safety risks.
• Provide access to ablution facilities at landfills
• Work to amend the landfill permit
9. Provide access to land and infrastructure

Reclaimers require access to land and infrastructure to sort their materials and prepare them for sale, as well as to change their position in the value chain. The slowness in municipalities and other parts of government making land available to reclaimers is consistently raised by all stakeholders as a key obstacle to integration.

In the immediate term, municipalities should give reclaimers access to spaces at their garden centres, transfer stations and depots.

And in the immediate term, municipal officials and reclaimers should work together to identify ideal locations for space and infrastructure for reclaimers and enter discussions with all parts of government that own land in these areas. The Palmer Street case study provides a good example of how this can be done.

10. Educate residents to increase reclaimers’ access to recyclables

Because of the ways that reclaimers have been denigrated, criminalized and stigmatized, many residents are suspicious of reclaimers and hostile towards them. In response to this, there should be a campaign to tell residents that reclaimers play an important role and that residents should separate materials for them and engage with them. It is best if reclaimers play a key role in these educational processes.

As part of the “Reclaim, Revalue, Reframe” project, the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) prioritized developing animated videos to educate school children and adult residents and encourage them to support reclaimers. These videos can be viewed via these links:

‘Initially residents, especially the ones with the eight meter high walls and eight strands of electric fences and all the rest of it, perceived anyone being on their street as a threat. And if there’s somebody they don’t know there, they make assumptions about them being involved with other things, in terms of security, that are not true. So, I think, again, it’s back to communication, knowing who’s working. I know my Pikitup guys. Get to know your recycler. It’s about forming relationships. But there’s something on the back of a lot of residents’ minds, that keeps them distant, distanced from the reclaimers. And there’s no reason. There’s a persistent perception of a threat, or something, that shouldn’t exist. And we all have a responsibility to remove that threat, because there’s nothing threatening about reclaimers. They’re doing an incredible job. And they’re business people.’

(Johannesburg Councillor, 2021)
Neighbourhoods where reclaimers have been integrated have demonstrated the productive power of the partnership approach.

‘The recyclers are organized, and they know what they need to do, and they know how to do it. It was such a relief to see them given an opportunity to organize their own business, which they’re perfectly capable of doing.’

(Johannesburg Resident, interviewed 2021)
In order for municipal officials to fully appreciate the work done by reclaimers and to fully engage in the WPIP, they need to understand the work that reclaimers do. The videos and stories about the day in a life of a landfill and street waste pickers provide some insight. But it is important that municipal officials (and industry representatives) spend at least a day working with reclaimers to understand the work they do and challenges they face.