

# Partnership vs Charity

A number of the Waste Picker Integration Principles emphasise the importance of partnering with waste pickers/reclaimers.

What does it mean to have a truly participatory process and to collaborate with reclaimers for waste picker integration?

**If you are not a reclaimer, a good way to start thinking about partnerships is to reflect on your own experiences working with waste pickers:**

- What roles did you and your organisation play?
- What roles did reclaimers play?
- What worked well?
- What problems were encountered?
- What did you learn?

## **Charity approach to waste picker integration**

Many municipalities, industry associations, companies, and NGOs use a “charity approach” when they relate to reclaimers. This can be the case even when they are trying to integrate reclaimers. The charity approach is based on (explicit and implicit) assumptions that:

1. reclaiming is a marginal, survivalist activity
2. reclaimers exist on the margins of society and the economy and are in need of “help”
3. reclaimers need charitable support
4. reclaimers should be integrated via special projects
5. reclaimers do not possess knowledge relevant to official recycling programmes
6. professionals and officials should design and implement waste picker integration for reclaimers.

## **The results:**

Research and reports from reclaimers show that when the charity approach is used, projects often have the following outcomes:

- they don't meet reclaimers' real needs
- reclaimers choose not to participate as the projects don't meet their real needs and/or undermine their interests

- reclaimers withdraw as they can end up earning less money and have worse working conditions
- reclaimers feel infantilized and denigrated as they are treated like children who have decisions made for them
- the projects don't achieve their stated objectives.

**Case study example:**

The Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality created a pilot project in which cooperatives formed by reclaimers at the Robinson Deep Landfill provided separation at source services in surrounding communities. The integration of reclaimers into separation at source was a positive goal. However, reclaimers were not involved in planning or overseeing the implementation of the pilot.

As a result, a number of flaws were built into the pilot that could have been avoided if reclaimers were partners in the project. **For example:**

- Reclaimers were not paid for their collection service and were required to sell to one particular buyer, who paid lower prices than they had been receiving before they were “integrated”.
- Although the city provided the cooperatives with a truck and driver, these were not always available when the cooperatives needed them, which decreased the amount of recyclables they could collect and sell.
- As a result, being “integrated” led to reclaimers earning less money, losing control over their daily work activities, and losing their ability to decide where to sell their materials.

Unsurprisingly, all of the reclaimers ended up quitting the pilot and returning to the landfill. Some paid casual workers to do their work in the separation at source programme, which turned them into “coopreneurs” instead of integrated reclaimers.

Finally, because the pilot did not include the street reclaimers who had been collecting in the pilot areas, the pilot resulted in them losing access to materials, decreasing their incomes, and worsening their working conditions.

To learn more about this pilot, see the Integrating Landfill Reclaimers case study and the references below.

[LINK TO: CASE STUDY](#) 



## Partnerships

In order to avoid these negative consequences and give effect to the Waste Picker Integration Principles, it is necessary to move beyond the charity approach and form meaningful partnerships for integration between municipalities and reclaimers (as well as between industry and reclaimers).

### **The partnership approach is grounded in the understandings that:**

1. reclaiming is a core part of the existing waste management system and recycling economy
2. reclaimers are full members of society and the economy whose work and contributions must be recognised and valued
3. reclaimers provide services to municipalities and industry and need to be paid for these services
4. waste picker integration initiatives must be systemic due to the ways that reclaiming is a part of official waste management and recycling systems and is affected by changes in these systems
5. reclaimers are the experts on how recyclables are collected in South African municipalities (as well as in many other post-colonial municipalities)
6. reclaimers should identify the key priorities for integration and should be equal partners in the design, implementation, review, and revision of integration and recycling programmes.

We want reclaimers to be seen as men and women who are providing an essential service and are worthy of consideration, not because they are poor, but because they are performing an important job...which all of society needs to recognize (ARO Organiser).

### **TIP**

#### **IF YOU ARE NOT A RECLAIMER:**

- Be conscious of the negative stereotypes you may have about reclaimers and make conscious efforts to let go of them.
- Always keep in mind that the work that reclaimers do is already part of waste management systems and the recycling economy.
- Seize the opportunity to learn more from reclaimers about who they are, their experiences, their analysis and proposals, and how the recycling value chain in South Africa works on the ground.
- Be humble.
- Remind yourself and reclaimers that integration is a new responsibility for you and your organisation.
- Share the challenges and constraints that you face in your work on integration. Request support from your organisation and from reclaimers.
- Share your concerns and fears.
- Be willing to admit mistakes and harms you or your organisation may have created for reclaimers in the past and present. Apologise and learn from these experiences. Prioritise working in partnership with reclaimers to redress harms.
- When you design or adapt a municipal recycling programme, ensure that reclaimers are partners in every step, including deciding what initiatives should be prioritised.

- Share your experiences and ideas and be open to changing them through meaningful engagement.
- When you engage with reclaimers, listen to and respect them; be transparent; share your information, knowledge and analysis; learn from them; and work with them as equal partners.
- Work with reclaimer representatives to identify power inequalities that undermine the possibilities for real partnerships and develop and implement ways to redress them (see the section on “What is Waste Picker Integration” on the Reclaim, Revalue, Reframe website).
- Ensure that your organisations provides reclaimers who attend integration meetings and work on integration projects with you with transport money, data, airtime, and stipends to compensate for lost earnings.

Luyanda Hlatshwayo, a reclaimer leader in the African Reclaimers Organisation explained the importance of this:

*‘You know. I’m giving up my time, giving up my earnings to be able to work on something [developing an integration pilot project] that was not putting anything at the table at that time. Well, I think that it really disturbed my flow of living. You know, I had to subsidise a lot of traveling, right, I had to subsidise not going to work for certain days, and you know that well, I’ve lost so much materials for these days ...You know, it was difficult at that time.’*



### HAVE AN IMMERSION DAY

Unilever and the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) partnered to develop and implement the Recycling with Reclaimers pilot project [link to Separation at Source by Reclaimers Case Study]. As part of the project they did an immersion day, when a senior Unilever representative spent a day working with reclaimers. This is what Unilever and ARO representatives had to say about the Immersion Day:

*‘The first thing is that you’ve got to check your privilege, nearly hourly, when working with organisations like ARO and it’s hard. It really is. You’ve got to be very deliberate about it. And I do think when they say we need a full day immersion with team members, I think that’s absolutely important and almost nothing should happen until that is done...that’s step one. Everyone needs to understand who everyone is and where they come from.’*



*(Unilever representative)*

*‘I think that [the immersion day] was the very most important step that Unilever took...they allowed us to be able to teach them from the ground the work that we are doing, which made it much more easier when we were sitting down on the table and writing policies of how we [are going] to work.’*



*(ARO Reclaimer representative)*

### The partnership approach should result in:

- better relationships
- the development of more appropriate and creative approaches to integration
- improved conditions and incomes for reclaimers
- quicker resolution of problems, and
- more efficient and effective systems.

It will also help in overcoming the history of stigmatization, exclusion, abuse, and exploitation of reclaimers.

### TIP

The partnership approach needs to include all types of waste pickers – men and women, South African and non-South African, landfill and street; young and old; organised and unorganised. This means that special strategies need to be developed and special efforts made to reach out to each different type of waste picker to ensure that they are all represented in the partnership.

### Gender and partnerships

Without a conscious effort to engage women waste pickers, it is likely that they will be excluded from integration partnerships and processes, their particular needs will not be addressed, and their ideas will not be discussed and taken forward. At the very beginning of the integration process, women waste pickers should play a leading role as men and women waste pickers and men and women from other parties work together to learn more about gender inequities between waste pickers and in the sector. They should also learn more from women waste pickers about their work, lives, challenges, and proposals. This can provide a base to develop **a gender strategy for waste picker integration**. A basic starting point is to ensure that women waste pickers are fully and equally represented in waste picker integration working groups, processes, and programmes and that their issues are prioritised.

Remember, if women waste pickers are not integrated then it is not waste picker integration!

### Partnering with organised and unorganised waste pickers

If waste pickers have formed democratic organisations, it is essential that all levels of government and industry value and respect these organisations and partner with them. Government and industry benefit from the existence of strong, democratic, representative waste picker organisations, as by partnering with them government and industry can effectively engage large numbers of waste pickers.

Organising takes time, effort, skills, and resources. This is why the Waste Picker Integration Guideline emphasises that government and industry need to provide financial and other resources to waste picker organisations so that they can recruit and represent more workers. Support for organising is a core part of waste picker integration.

But right now, the majority of waste pickers in South Africa are not organised. This means that municipalities and industry need to do more than simply engage waste picker organisations to reach out to and engage the widest possible number of waste pickers. This will require engaging individual waste pickers and calling open meetings with them to hear their needs and receive their inputs.

**The Guideline presents some ideas on how municipalities can reach out to and engage unorganised waste pickers. These include:**

- contacting waste pickers who they already know because the waste pickers participated in meetings and workshops, filed complaints, protested etc. and asking them to tell other waste pickers about the proposal to work together on waste picker integration.
- asking landfill officials to engage waste pickers working on their sites
- finding out whether the local economic development (LED) office and other municipal departments have contact with waste pickers and involving them in the process.
- asking producer responsibility organisations and corporates that have contact with waste pickers in the municipality to assist.

The Local Economic Development Department in municipalities typically has the skills required to conduct these activities and should be involved. As the best people to reach out to waste pickers and build trust with them are other waste pickers, municipalities and industry should see how they can partner with existing waste picker organisations from other municipalities and at a national level (as well as their municipality if there are organisations present) to most effectively engage unorganised waste pickers. They should also build skills of local waste pickers and pay them to engage other waste pickers about integration. All of these activities may also lead to organising and networking between local waste pickers who can elect representatives to participate in integration processes, even if they do not want to form or join an organisation.

**NOTE**

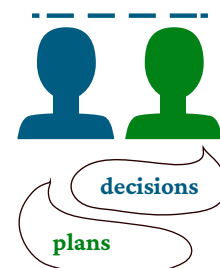
**IMPORTANT!**

Although each participatory integration process will be different, it is important that all stakeholders agree on the form it will take up front and the principles that will guide it.

**TIP**

It is very important that all parties in a partnership agree up front how they will work together, make decisions, and resolve disputes.

It is also extremely important that all parties agree on how to put the integration principles into practice in their collaborative work and projects.



The Reclaim, Revalue, Reframe project held a webinar on Partnering with Reclaimers for Integration [link to: the Partnering with Reclaimers for Integration webinar video]. In the webinar, speakers from industry, municipalities and reclaimer organisations reflected on their own experiences of partnerships and lessons learned about what underpins successful collaborations. Watch the webinar to learn more about developing effective partnerships between municipalities, corporates, and reclaimer organisations.

LINK TO: THE PARTNERING WITH RECLAIMERS  
FOR INTEGRATION WEBINAR VIDEO



## References

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**Building Capacity for  
Waste Picker Integration**

By Melanie Samson, Tanya Zack  
and Kirsten Harrison  
design: Willemijn Schellekens