What is waste picker integration?

What do you think of when you hear the words “waste picker integration”? Most people probably think about integrating individual waste pickers into municipal waste management systems and recycling programmes.

Historically, this is how most South African policy makers and municipal, industry, and corporate representatives approached integration. Integration projects focused on providing training and personal protective equipment (PPE) to individual waste pickers, or encouraging waste pickers to form cooperatives that then received business training and basic equipment like baling machines. In a very small number of cases, integration projects have supported waste pickers to collect recyclables from residents, but without paying them for the provision of this service. This approach is still dominant in many places in South Africa.

Developing a new approach – integrating systems and people

Stakeholders who worked together between 2016 and 2019 to develop government’s Waste Picker Integration Guideline for South Africa (the Guideline) developed a different approach.

They recognised that instead of working as isolated individuals, waste pickers have created an entire “separation outside source” (SoS) system that is very effective - so effective that without significant municipal or industry recycling programmes, South Africa has recycling rates comparable to European countries for some recyclables.
Because of this, they agreed that waste picker integration needs to include waste pickers’ SoS system as well as individual waste pickers. The stakeholders also agreed that we should build from the existing SoS system to develop an official system to collect recyclables and integrate reclaimers that is relevant to our South African context instead of importing models from other countries.

As reclamer Louis Mahlangu from the African Reclaimer Organisation told officials: “We’re not integrating into your system, you’re integrating into ours!”

IF YOU DON’T KNOW, NOW YOU KNOW
Did you know that research in Johannesburg found that reclaimers are more effective at collecting recyclables as part of separation at source than private companies?

This is because of the differences in what they collect.

When private companies and cooperatives of non-reclaimers are contracted to collect recyclables from residents, they only collect recyclables that residents have put into special bags to be collected separately from their waste. But most residents in South Africa do not separate their recyclables. So, all of the recyclables residents put in their rubbish bins are sent to landfills.

However, when reclaimers provide separation at source services, in addition to collecting the bags of recyclables, they also continue to salvage materials from rubbish bins. As a result, reclaimers extract a larger amount of recyclables from the waste stream than the private companies and non-reclaimer cooperatives.

See the “Recycling with Reclaimers” case study on the Reclaim, Revalue, Reframe website to learn more.
Defining waste picker integration in South Africa
This background helps to explain why the *Waste Picker Integration Guideline for South Africa* defines waste picker integration in the following way:

**Waste picker integration**

- **is the creation of a** formally planned recycling system **that values and improves** the present role of waste pickers,

- **builds** on the strengths of their existing system for collecting and revaluing materials,

- **includes** waste pickers as key partners in its design, implementation, evaluation, revision, and

- **includes** the integration of waste pickers’ work, as well as the political, economic, social, legal and environmental integration of waste pickers.
Waste Picker Integration Principles

The Guideline recognises that each municipality and industry is unique, and that as a result waste picker integration will take different forms in different places and different industries.

To ensure that these various forms of integration still comply with the definition of integration, stakeholders agreed on Ten Waste Picker Integration Principles that must underpin all integration programmes and projects.

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<th>Principle</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Recognition, respect and redress</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Value waste pickers’ expertise</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Meaningful engagement</td>
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<td>Build on what exists</td>
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<td>Increased diversion and cost effectiveness</td>
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<td>Evidence-based</td>
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<td>Enabling environment</td>
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<td>Improved conditions and income</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Compensation for services and savings</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Holistic integration</td>
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SEVEN KEY INTEGRATION QUESTIONS

Even though all stakeholders may use the term “waste picker integration”, that does not mean that they understand it in the same way. This can lead to unnecessary confusion, disappointment, animosity, and failed projects.

It is crucial that all stakeholders know and understand the definition of integration and the integration principles.

In addition, because of the flexible approach to integration that takes local conditions into account, whenever stakeholders start a new integration process or programme it is important that they have an explicit agreement on what integration means in that context (Sekhwela and Samson, 2020).

In order to do so, it can be helpful for them to discuss the following question and agree on the answers:

- Who/what is being integrated into what, when, why, how, by whom, and in whose interest?

Government commitment to integration

On page 3 of the Guideline, government states the following:

Government recognises the pioneering role of waste pickers in the development of recycling collection systems in South Africa. Waste picker integration is necessary to ensure that waste pickers’ incomes, conditions, job security, position in the value chain and dignity are improved as the recycling economy is expanded. Waste picker integration advances key government priorities related to job creation, poverty alleviation, environmental protection and economic transformation. It is an innovative way to include the informal economy. Waste picker integration ensures that official recycling programmes are appropriate for the South African context and increases their viability by building on (rather than competing with) waste pickers’ informal collection system.

Waste picker integration is a learning process

Waste picker integration is new in South Africa. It requires every stakeholder to learn new things, be open to new ideas, and change what they do, how they do it, and how they relate to each other. This includes national, provincial and local governments, industry, corporations, NGOs, academics, consultants, waste pickers, and other civil society and political organisations.

Power and waste picker integration

Waste picker integration requires municipal, industry, and corporate representatives to work collaboratively with waste pickers.

But waste picker and non-waste picker representatives do not enter into discussions with each other on an equal footing.
Because race and class are so tightly connected in South Africa, virtually all waste pickers are black and industry representatives are still predominantly white. The value chain is highly racialized. Black government and industry representatives are not in the same class as waste pickers and are not necessarily immune to negative assumptions about waste pickers.

There are also other forms of power and inequity that affect waste picker integration:

- **Institutional power** - Government at all levels, industries, and corporations (as well as NGOs) have institutional power over waste pickers.

- **Financial resources** - They also have financial and human resources to allocate to integration work. Waste pickers do not have these resources.

- **Meeting times** - Meetings about waste picker integration are almost always held at times convenient for the non-waste pickers – during regular working hours when officials are being paid to work, but when waste pickers should be reclaiming and earning their living.

- **Meeting locations** - Meetings are also held at locations that are convenient for non-waste pickers. It can be challenging for waste pickers to reach their counterparts’ offices with public transport. In addition, these spaces can be very alienating for waste pickers. The times and locations of meetings give non-waste pickers even more power over waste pickers.

- **Paying to integrate** - In order to do integration work, waste pickers usually need to give up their daily income, pay for their own transportation to attend meetings, and purchase airtime and data to communicate with their counterparts. So, waste pickers don’t just subsidize municipalities and industry by collecting recyclables for free and extending the lives of landfills, they also subsidize integration processes (unless the other parties pay them for lost earnings and cover their transport and communication costs).

**DON’T FORGET ABOUT GENDER**

Colonialism, apartheid, patriarchy and racial capitalism created and enforced gender identities and gender divisions of labour that value men over women. Because they also linked gender to race and class, not all women experience the same kinds of oppressions and some women have power over others (such as South African women over women migrants from other countries). Similarly, not all men have the same kinds of power over different kinds of women and some women have power over some men (such as white women over black men).

But all men (including waste pickers and non-waste pickers) have some form of structural power over the black women who work as waste pickers in South Africa.

If waste picker integration does not identify and redress these forms of power, does not include women waste pickers as equal partners in decision-making, and does not prioritise meeting women’s needs and interests, then it is not waste picker integration!
The section of the Reclaim, Revalue, Reframe website on “Gender and Waste Picking” discusses the particular challenges faced by women waste pickers, the importance of supporting women waste pickers to organise, and ways to support and work with women waste pickers to redress gender inequities.

- **Negative assumptions and stigmatization** - Non-waste pickers involved in integration are members of a society that stigmatizes waste pickers and does not see them as full human beings. The non-waste pickers may not be conscious of the negative assumptions that they hold about waste pickers and how these are rooted in the ways colonizers saw and treated black people, but these assumptions shape how they relate to waste pickers.

- **Status quo** - Finally, non-waste pickers are used to making decisions that affect waste pickers without engaging them. Waste pickers are objects of their policies and programmes, not partners.

For all of these reasons, transforming power relations needs to be a crucial part of integration. It is important that waste pickers and non-waste pickers openly discuss the unequal power relations between them (including race, gender, and class relations), where they come from, and how they must be changed.

It is also essential that non-waste pickers recognise their privilege, that integration processes are designed to make these inequities explicit, and that stakeholders agree on how to proactively redress these inequities in integration processes and programmes. Here is what one corporate representative had to say about the importance of doing this:

“The fact that you are being paid to do this as a project, that is one of the first privileges and ARO [the African Reclammers Organisation] is not necessarily being paid to do it unless you give them funding. You have a computer, phone, electricity, car. You have that freedom. You also have the freedom that if something else comes up you can go and do that. I used to get frustrated when something else comes up [and ARO representatives could not attend meetings or meet deadlines], but then there is a flood that ARO has to go deal with it.”

- Unilever representative

The Evaluation of the Recycling with Reclaimers Pilot Project and the webinar on “Collaborating with Reclaimers” include reflections by the different parties on how they confronted and addressed some of these power relations when working together and can provide useful starting points for discussions on these important issues.
Some key points to remember about waste picker integration

Waste picker integration:
• must improve the incomes and working conditions of waste pickers
• is a partnership with waste pickers
• is a process that develops over time
• advances a number of key policy priorities in South Africa
• processes must address unequal power relations based on race, gender, class, and other social divisions
• requires transformation of the recycling value chain
• contributes to redressing historical injustices
• contributes to the democratization of our political processes, cities, neighbourhoods, and economy
• must be planned.

Case Studies
The “Case Studies” section of the Reclaim, Revalue, Reframe website presents examples of a number of different approaches to waste picker integration. These include – integration via cooperatives, the provision of infrastructure for integration, integration of independent reclaimers, and integration at landfills.

Check out the case studies and see what ideas and conversations they can spark in your own discussions on integration.

References