Palmer Street Recycling
eThekwini - providing public infrastructure for recycling

This project is an infrastructural response to the needs of waste pickers. It provides an environment, equipment, working gear and a system for materials sourcing and sale that professionalizes reclaiming. It responds to the urban management problems that arise from sorting and sales occurring on roadsides without adequate infrastructure. And it offers more than a recycling solution - it also creates public facilities for the general public and integrates these with reclaiming activities. It is a partnership between the NGO Asiye eTafuleni and the municipality that involves waste pickers and private intermediaries who purchase materials.

1 Context of reclaiming in eThekwini

A big focus of reclaiming by informal independent waste pickers in eThekwini is on retrieving clean material from hotels and from retailers and industry. This includes cardboard, plastics, paper, glass bottles and cans. People access the material ‘through the back door’. They often set up relationships with managers or security guards who reserve material from them. They may visit the same shop or hotel several times in a single day.

The role of intermediaries in eThekwini is pronounced and is very evident in the inner city where AeT estimates 400 to 500 waste pickers work. There are several companies who purchase recyclables from waste pickers to sell to recycling companies. Typically trucks park on the roadside in dense areas such as the inner city. Waste pickers can bring any amount of salvaged material to them – each truck typically buys one specific material (e.g. cardboard) and waste pickers are paid in cash on the spot.

There are a few modest sized buy-back centres in the inner city – including very small storefronts that take one type of materials (plastics or cans), as well as an off-street facility that takes various kinds of recyclables. In some cases prices vary between these centres.

The terrain contributes to the need for transport and collection points for materials. The landscape of eThekwini is extremely hilly. This makes pulling carts for long distances difficult. Many waste pickers carry materials on their shoulders.

Reclaiming is informal work. And eThekwini has a long history in responding progressively to informal work. Most well known amongst the initiatives is the Warwick Triangle – a massive informal traders market that with consistent and enormous input, design and management by the City and by AeT has become flourishing centre of multiple specialist markets, each
Reclaim Revalue Reframe

with dedicated facilities and all extremely well connected in this transport hub. Waste pickers collect materials around the informal traders, and in the afternoons an impromptu second hand goods market, operated by waste pickers who are selling usable items they have found, takes place along the roadside close to the bovine head cookers market at Warwick.

2 The NGO

Asiye eTafuleni (AeT) is an NGO that works alongside informal workers who use public spaces for their livelihoods and this includes wood sellers, waste pickers, water providers and others. In AeT’s work, they have responded to the prejudiced and disrespectful treatment that informal workers, and street waste pickers in particular, are subject to. Despite being responsible for 150 tons of recycled material daily in Durban, the negative perceptions remain. For women waste pickers, exploitation and harassment are often extreme. Inner city waste pickers are overly policed and the police have an unsympathetic attitude towards informal workers. The police have regular clean up missions and residents have bad attitudes towards waste pickers. Waste pickers are at times exploited by businesses – who may require them to offload goods or do other ‘free labour’ tasks in exchange for materials.

3 The problem

The project was a response to somewhat different, but interrelated problems identified by the municipality and AeT.

For the municipality - The project is a response to an urban management challenge faced by the municipality – of recyclables being sorted and stored in public spaces, often on the roadside. The City’s reaction to waste pickers has often been to confiscate their goods and to chase traders away, in an effort to keep the city streets tidy. In addition, the project is also a response to the City’s wish, through its Business Support Unit, to assist waste waste pickers in a managed way, and its need to find workable solutions.

For waste pickers - AeT’s work with the informal sector is based on detailed research. In research conducted by AET in the first phase of a larger programme called the ‘Imagine Durban Informal Recycling Pilot Project’, the following challenges were identified by waste pickers interviewed:

- ‘The devastating impact of the theft of salvaged recyclables (the majority of the women waste pickers reported this as a challenge);
- The difficulty of finding safe spaces to store trolleys overnight;
- Difficulties related to sorting cardboard on narrow pavements located in areas of high pedestrian and vehicle traffic;
- Lack of access to ablution blocks or facilities for storage of clothes and valuables.

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The approach
Palmer Street Recycling Facility emerged out of the Imagine Durban Informal Recycling Project which was implemented by Asiy eTafule (AeT) from 2010 to 2012. The Imagine Durban Demonstration Fund was a project run collaboratively between eThekwini municipality and a Vancouver-based NGO called Sustainable Cities (www.aet.org.za).

This response offers an alternative, off street facility that enables sorting and selling in a managed facility. The approach in this project is to connect waste pickers to waste generators and to make connections on the street for effective waste reclaiming. This is a City-owned facility and the City manages the security and cleaning of the park and the facility. There are three municipal workers attached to the facility.

AeT believes in professionalizing the work that is done in public space. The project focuses on improving the livelihoods of informal cardboard waste pickers and on improving the management of cardboard collection processes in public spaces. Currently, the informal recycling economy in the inner city provides livelihoods for approximately 500 people. AeT records the key selling points in the inner city as: Palmer Street, Cnr Field and West Street, Cnr Gardiner and Smith Street and Pine Street. AeT began the project in 2009 and since then has provided:

- Custom made aprons
- Custom-made trolleys
- Equipment, including a scale

The approach taken by AeT is to undertake a research process in order to understand the complexities of the cardboard recycling sector, followed by work experience in the field and finally the implementation of specific custom-designed products and equipment. AeT worked with two communities of waste pickers including a group in Palmer Street. The Palmer Street waste pickers had already self-organized and AeT worked with them by looking at ways to improve working environments for the two groups of waste pickers including the provision of safety gear, access to materials and infrastructure.

Focus on women waste pickers
AeT helped to formalize the Palmer Street waste pickers under the banner Friends of the Waste pickers. This group of women waste pickers are easy to recognize by their hats that say Friends of the Waste pickers and therefore more respected by waste generators. They approach companies to reserve materials for them (they have a letter on a formal letterhead for this purpose). An organized group also facilitates better bargaining power to enable them to negotiate for better prices. The group has regular meetings and a WhatsApp group helps the women maintain contact with one another and keep up to date on information.

AeT also recognizes that waste pickers are vulnerable, often confronting a coincidence of social and economic problems including poverty and homelessness. Many face abuse and addiction. AeT has employed a social worker to work with waste pickers and where possible to refer and connect them with social services. These services extend from assistance in obtaining identification cards to assistance in finding shelter, reconnecting with family or obtaining substance rehabilitation assistance.

According to AeT:
"Shared work provides a greater ability to meet the needs of the industry for clean, sorted and baled material of quality and quantity. This will provide the opportunity for women to be change agents in their communities regardless of their educational backgrounds, be ambassadors and educate waste generators."

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AeT, undated, Growing in the cracks. The Palmer Street Recycling Facility, AET, Durban.
6 The infrastructure: The Palmer Street Recycling Facility

AeT, in partnership with eThekwini Municipality and other actors, have created a recycling facility in Palmer Street, the intention of which has been to create a safe working environment for waste pickers. The intervention cost between 2 and 2.5 million rands.

AET went through a process with waste pickers to find a piece of land. The site they identified was an unused site, but Richard Dobson of AeT knew it had been earmarked for a pocket park. ‘A ton of saved cardboard is the equivalent of 17 trees saved,’ says Richard. And so the plan for the park has been to have a 17 tree park with the facility on the side of it. This vision has been realized. It took eight years to get the City to build the facility and it was finished in 2019. The facility sits on the edge of the park and has a sorting floor of about 100 square metres. The space is designed so that the waste pickers’ work is visible from the park. It has eight storage facilities and wire cages. There are spaces where waste pickers can put their workwear during the day and can store their work gear and trolleys at night. It also has much needed public ablution facilities. The high spec public toilets that have been provided here are robust and they will serve both the facility and the adjacent park. AeT reports that the women’s incomes have increased by 20-25% as a result of their use of the facility.

Waste pickers set up efficient arrangements with intermediaries who come to the facility to buy the materials they have collected. This means there is little on-site storage and what storage there is, is short term.

For ongoing maintenance and operations AeT work with the municipality’s Business Support Unit EM and the Parks Department. AeT is managing the facility with the City’s support. It co-managed by the Parks Department who manage the toilets and the adjacent park and the Business Support Unit who manage the informal waste pickers and issue the permits. The City also provides security to the premises.

The benefits of the facility include: the provision of a professional environment with a safe space, the possibility of increasing recyclable materials and provision of a space for organizing. It is an empowering model. The waste pickers can determine the price at which they want to sell and call intermediaries who meet their price.

7 Lessons

Multi-agency approach: This work requires a multi-agency approach within the municipality. A municipal reference group comprising officials from several departments was set up for the project development. This was very useful in bringing the range of departments who have oversight for planning, economic development, parks and waste into the conversation and planning process. It also helped in the operationalizing of the facility, which involves several units of the City. It is important to bring both development and security departments into the room for these projects. The municipality cannot set up developmental and supportive programmes and at the same time have police chasing waste pickers. So coordination between policing arms and economic and planning arms of the City is essential.

Appropriate infrastructure and spatial models: We don’t have spatial models and infrastructure that suit the informal nature of much of employment that occurs in our cities. We need to be innovative and to develop and pilot prototypes of waste picker infrastructure that suits the particular working conditions, geographies, management arrangements and reclaiming experiences and cultures in different cities and towns.

Multi-use public spaces: It is possible to enhance unused public space into high quality space (like this public park) and to incorporate facilities to support reclaiming in the same space. This infrastructure has improved the local environment.

NGO partners and facilitators: It is important for municipalities to partner with NGOs who have worked with waste pickers and informal workers, and with organisations that have operated similar working spaces. These NGOs often have the skills, experience and contacts for ensuring participatory
Successes

Palmer Street Recycling centre is
• Organized
• Safe
• Clean
• Better for women
• Public toilets

Lots of people involved:
• Waste pickers
• Local businesses (S@S)
• Security
• Cleaners
• Police
• NGO partners
• Several Municipality departments

This idea can be replicated!
processes and for bringing waste pickers and their needs to the table. They may also bring international experience and research and monitoring protocols and can link projects with additional technical capacity.

**Waste picker-friendly facilities:** The sorting and compacting of recyclables conducted by waste pickers needs to be understood so that appropriate facilities are designed.

Not all the facilities required are expensive. To allow trucks to collect from waste pickers in the way they do in eThekwini may simply require a lay-by or reserved loading bay.

Allowing for mobile facilities may not require land but rather arrangements and loading bays to permit intermediaries to access waste pickers at various points in the city. This mobile service can reduce the amount of materials that is stored in public places.

**Pro-active budgeting:** Because several departments are involved and reclaiming touches on so many municipal mandates, it can get lost or not prioritized for budgeting. It is important to work out what the key thrust of the particular project is in order to target resources effectively. Is the project tackling unemployment/waste pickers’ insecure income and working conditions/climate change/urban management/homelessness/social exclusion/waste diversion? And if it is tackling several of these, how should it be strategized and packaged for resource allocation? This is true for municipal resources as well as for external funds.

**More to do and scaling up:** The facility needs to be publicized more, both to waste pickers and to businesses, who could drop their recyclable materials at the facility.

This model can be easily replicated in other parts of the city. The idea is to set up basic facilities that would be satellites of the Palmer Street facility and would offer public toilets and sorting space, in a well-designed light facility. These facilities need not be exclusionary. They should be attached to public toilets and can be connected to other public facilities.

AeT also conceptualized the idea of safe sidewalks in the Imagine Durban project. Although this was not implemented, it remains an important concept to introduce for the eThekwini mode of reclaiming taking place on roadsides.

8. **Questions for municipalities**
   a) How can your municipality develop partnerships and good working relationships with waste pickers?
   b) How can multi-departmental coordinated approaches be initiated and supported in your municipality?
   c) How can the prejudice directed at waste pickers be addressed and overcome?
   d) What role should residents and businesses play in supporting waste picker integration programmes?
   e) How can the municipality ensure that waste pickers play a key role in the development of infrastructure projects and that these meet waste pickers’ needs?
   f) What kinds of infrastructure do municipal and waste picker representatives think would be most useful in your municipality?

9. **Questions for waste pickers**
   a) What are your infrastructure needs?
   b) Would a facility like this be useful for you? What would need to be changed and done differently?
   c) How have you engaged the municipality to secure infrastructure? How did they respond?
   d) What should municipalities do to work with waste pickers to identify and develop relevant infrastructure projects?
   e) How should waste pickers be involved in the development and implementation of infrastructure projects?

10. **Discussion**
    a) Discuss the provision of land and a sorting facility as an effective method for supporting waste picker integration.
    b) Discuss alternative methods of on-street recycling collection such as those seen in eThekwini.

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