Separation at source by reclaimers

Case study #01

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The Recycling with Reclaimers Pilot Project in the Johannesburg suburbs of Brixton and Auckland Park is a test case for the payment of reclaimers for providing a separation at source collection service in South Africa. It is led by the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) and presents a way of integrating and paying individual reclaimers without requiring them to form cooperatives. It is an example of reclaimers working with residents, private companies, and the municipality to improve reclaimers’ incomes, their working conditions, and collection rates. It involves partnerships, reclamer organising, infrastructure, equipment and the collection of data.

1 The location
Brixton and Auckland Park are adjoining suburbs west of Johannesburg’s inner city.

2 Background
It is a hot day, and the sun is beating down on reclaimers who have been working since early in the morning pulling trolleys that started off empty but now carry loads of up to 180 kg. The reclaimers wait patiently and joke with each other until it is their turn to weigh the recyclables they collected that day. This measuring of materials isn’t happening because they are about to sell them – they will do that later in the week. The reclaimers are weighing their recyclables because they are part of the African Reclaimers Organisation’s “Recycling with Reclaimers” pilot project and so will be paid 50 cents per kg collected for the collection service they provide to residents in Brixton and Auckland Park.

The African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) was formed in 2017. It is a democratic organisation that unites reclaimers from across the city, including landfill and street reclaimers, women and men, and South Africans and reclaimers from neighbouring countries. Having been involved in the development of the Waste Picker Integration Guideline for South Africa, ARO recognised the need to develop and pilot models to integrate and pay reclaimers that would provide effective and efficient alternatives to the city’s existing separation at source programmes that excluded reclaimers, causing them great hardship. As the overwhelming majority of reclaimers in Johannesburg are not members of cooperatives and do not want to join cooperatives, ARO prioritised developing a model that would integrate individual reclaimers.
3. Partnering and taking responsibility
Because reclaimers are stigmatized and often harassed by residents, ARO prioritised developing relationships with resident associations and changing how residents and reclaimers relate to each other. This would also provide reclaimers with more secure access to recyclables, improving their incomes and working conditions.

The Brixton Community Forum (BCF) was one of the first resident groups that reached out to ARO. After several meetings and presentations, the BCF and ARO agreed that residents would separate their recyclables to be collected by ARO members. The BCF helped to encourage the Auckland Park Residents’ Association (APRA) in the neighbouring suburb to join the initiative.

At the same time, ARO was engaging with industry and corporates (who are responsible for extracting their waste materials from the environment) to support piloting of separation at source by reclaimers. Unilever agreed to partner with ARO on Recycling with Reclaimers, providing funds to run the pilot and pay reclaimers. An academic from the University of the Witwatersrand joined to assist in researching examples in other countries, generating and analysing data, building capacity, and assisting the two parties to work together.

Although the municipality and Pikitup were not official partners, they agreed to facilitate the pilot. ARO worked closely with the local Pikitup depot to implement the pilot and provides data to the depot.

The pilot received additional support from PETCO, which donated a scale, plastic bags, bins and stickers to put on the bins saying “I recycle with reclaimers”. Polycos donated a Packa-Ching unit. Packaging South Africa, PETCO, Polycos, The Glass Recycling Company and Fibre Circle contributed towards the baseline study at the start of the project.

4. The pilot approach
Fifty reclaimers who were already working in the area were selected to be involved. Some left the pilot during the COVID-19 lockdown or for personal reasons and were replaced by other reclaimers working in the area. Reclaimers who were not members of ARO joined the project. Participating reclaimers received uniforms and identification cards associating them with the project.

Pilot aims:
• Improve relationships between residents and reclaimers
• Increase the number of households separating recyclables
• Provide a regular collection service
• Increase the recycling rate
• Improve reclaimers working conditions
• Increase reclaimers incomes

ARO managed the implementation of the pilot. This involved a wide range of tasks, including: ongoing liaison with residents, the resident committees, the Pikitup depot and the local councillor; responding to complaints from residents; producing weekly pamphlets reporting the number of reclaimers who participated and the weight of the recyclables extracted from the waste stream; solving any crisis that emerged; sweeping the area at the end of the day to ensure all materials were collected; weighing the materials; and ensuring proper participation by reclaimers.

When South Africa entered the Stage 5 COVID-19 lockdown, reclaimers were not permitted to work for several months. As a result, a decision was taken to halt the service payment so that the funds could be used to benefit all reclaimers. The service payments recommenced in 2022, after the evaluation on which this summary is based was completed.

Everyone benefits

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I have no clue what they are doing, but waste pickers are making a mess

We are not part of the community

I've learned they do brilliant work. I must assist!

We now can participate in projects, be part of the community and we gather more recyclables

Less waste goes to landfills now

We've got data for recycling records

We can tick our targets :-)

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Pilot details – how it worked

a) Each week, the reclaimers gave local residents plastic bags for their recyclables.

b) The residents placed their recyclables in these bags and left them on the sidewalk outside their homes for collection by the reclaimers on Tuesday mornings.

c) Reclaimers collected full bags and took them to the park to be weighed.

d) Although not initially anticipated, reclaimers also salvaged recyclables that were still thrown away in rubbish bins.

e) Reclaimers were paid R0.50 per kilogram as the service fee. They still sold the materials to their usual buyers.

f) A truck – first one hired by ARO and then a truck donated to ARO by UNIDO - was used by ARO to provide a sweep service at the end of the day, collecting recyclables that were not collected by reclaimers.

g) Resident champions provided the interface between the project and residents, and ARO pilot leaders interfaced between the project and reclaimers. The champions and ARO pilot leaders were in regular communication.

h) A WhatsApp group including resident champions, ARO pilot leaders, the Wits representative and the local ward councillor provided a platform for information sharing, project updates and the raising of and responses to problems.

6. Education and community engagement

Education and community engagement by ARO were key components of the project. ARO conducted workshops on who reclaimers are, what they do, their contributions, and the pilot for residents, school children and even children in the creche. ARO organisers and participating reclaimers gave residents pamphlets explaining the pilot, what residents should separate, and when they should put materials out. ARO participated in community events where they gave children trolley rides and provided more information on ARO and the pilot. ARO and the community held joint clean-up campaigns.

7. Pilot impact

Relationships between residents and reclaimers

Resident key informants were unanimous that the biggest success of the pilot was the improved relationship between residents and reclaimers. 38% of residents who participated in a small survey said the pilot improved their perceptions of reclaimers. The local councillor said that while she had negative experiences and problems with reclaimers in other parts of her ward, the pilot was “phenomenal”. Residents identified four key factors that improved their perceptions of reclaimers: 1) familiarity from seeing the same people every week, 2) nametags, 3) awareness and education about reclaimers’ work and lives, and 4) the wearing of uniforms. Some residents set up tables with tea and snacks for reclaimers and donated food during the COVID-19 crisis, as well as soapy water for reclaimers to sanitise themselves.

These new relations changed reclaimers’ status in the pilot area. While in the Baseline 22% of reclaimers felt valued or extremely valued, this increased to 60% in the Evaluation. 98% of reclaimers felt welcome in Brixton and Auckland Park, 95% felt they were part of the community, and 85% said that this improved since the start of the pilot. One reclaimer stated that as a result of the pilot, “I actually, I felt like I was one of the many counted here in South Africa”.

Resident participation and collection service

Two thirds of reclaimers reported an increase in resident separation of materials. However, 95% of reclaimers found trash in the ARO recycling bags and 98% still salvaged from bins because residents threw recyclables away with their rubbish. Analysis conducted on one day found that 71% of the recyclables came from the bins and 29% from the bags. This highlighted a key advantage that reclaimers have over private companies in providing a S@S service – because companies only collect the separated bags of recyclables, they leave the bulk of the materials in the waste stream. As reclaimers also extract recyclables from bins, they provide a far more effective service during the long period required for all residents to participate fully.
Despite initial hiccups, residents highlighted the regularity of the collection service as a key success of the pilot, with the councillor noting that it was a more reliable and effective service than the one previously provided by Pikitup cooperatives.

**Recyclables collected**
The average daily weight of recyclables collected by each reclaimer rose from 117.34kg in the first four weeks of March 2020 to an average of 144.5 kg by October 27, 2020. If all 8000 reclaimers in collect the average at the very start of the pilot, it would take them just 27.7 days to collect the 25,991 tonnes of recyclables collected by Pikitup and all of its contracted private companies and cooperatives in 2018/2019. Using the average amount collected with the pilot's intervention, it would take only 22.5 days.

**Working conditions**
The main improvements in reclaimers' working conditions derived from better relationships with both other reclaimers and residents. Reclaimers identified receiving uniforms as their top benefit from the pilot, reporting it decreased harassment and increased their access to materials. One said: "I have received an overall, and even places where we could not enter, we can now enter".

**Incomes**
Because of participant turnover and the redirection of the service fee funds during the lockdowns, not all reclaimers surveyed had received the service fee. Of those who did, 75% used it for necessities and 4% to pay for school fees. Extending the fee to all recyclables collected on all days would make an important difference to reclaimers' incomes and their families' quality of life.

8. **Lessons**

**Knowledge sharing - Advice for other municipalities considering this approach and in developing their own approaches**

Reclaimers and residents led the project, with the support of Unilever and Wits. Their ownership of the process, their ability to partner with funders, and the fact that the project was based on a system that already existed made this an innovative partnership and effective collection system. A good working relationship with the waste management depot was essential. Municipalities should join as official partners and provide sorting and storage spaces. The payment of a service fee can significantly improve reclaimers' quality of life.

**Recommendations**
Some key recommendations for reclaimer-resident collaborations include:
1. develop strong relationships between the reclaimers, the resident association, councillor, and waste management service provider
2. create a team of resident Champions
3. appoint street captains
4. champions should spend a day working with reclaimers in their area
5. reclaimers should educate and engage residents through public meetings and participation in community events
6. reclaimers should engage and educate children, and include families in the programme;
7. partners should establish a communication infrastructure and hold regular meetings
8. partners should agree on collection routes and schedules
9. residents associations should exchange ideas with their counterparts in other areas
10. reclaimers and residents should have realistic expectations and set time frames based on resources and time available.
Additional recommendations for collaborations with corporates, industry, and municipalities include:

1. follow the recommendations for reclamer-resident collaborations
2. recognise the centrality of social relationships to S@S and include strengthening relationships as a key goal
3. provide pre-proposal funding
4. pay reclamer representatives for work developing, implementing and evaluating the pilot and do not rely on exploiting their free labour
5. actively support reclamer organising as part of the programme
6. representatives should have decision-making power;
7. all non-reclaimers should spend a day working with reclaimers and attend a reclamer meeting to understand more about how a democratic organisation works
8. partners should develop clear written agreements on principles and all aspects of the collaboration
9. there should be full transparency and joint decision-making
10. resources should be provided to enable full participation of the reclamer organisation representatives
11. reclaimers’ priorities should be prioritised
12. non-reclaimers should recognise their privilege, and unequal power relations should be proactively identified and addressed.