The Harrington Street Gardens Case Study

The Harrington Buyback Centre (HBBC) in the City of Cape Town supported reclaimers by buying their recyclables and providing a sorting space in a safe, well-located area of the city. The model had many benefits for the city and for reclaimers. But it was shut down through the administration of planning regulations. The HBBC illustrates the shortcomings of planning regulations in South African cities and the inability of city planning schemes in many instances to support the informal economy.
1. **Zoning regulations rule amidst controversy**

The Harrington Buyback Centre (HBBC) in the City of Cape Town supported reclaimers by buying their recyclables and providing a sorting space in a safe, well-located area of the city. Situated in the Cape Town CBD, the centre sustained 200-400 people and employed four staff members. In March 2015, as recorded by GreenCape, the HBBC worked with 200 reclaimers and three reliable collectors. The agents worked with 50 clients located in a 2.5km radius. (GreenCape, 2017:7). Each agent collected between 50-300 kg per day of recyclable material and earned on average of R2,200 per month.

In 2016, the City of Cape Town closed the centre over objections around its location in a primarily residential street – 115 Harrington Street. This despite the important role that the HBBC played in the lives of some of the most economically and socially marginalized members of the City of Cape Town, as well as in the recycling value chain.

The City of Cape Town acknowledged that the centre assisted in reducing the daily collection of waste by the City as well as the transport costs associated with transporting waste to landfill sites. The ward councillor even offered to assist the applicant to find a lease to another portion of city-owned land in close proximity. However, it is unclear if this happened.

The closing of the centre was opposed by the Waste Minimisation Department as well as other departments who supported its important work and the value it added to recycling in the city. However, the Planning Department closed down the centre on the basis of planning regulations around zoning.

This case demonstrates the fragility of livelihoods in the informal sector.

2. **The Approach of the Harrington Buyback Centre**

The work of the HBBC is well recorded in the GreenCape Project Report on the City of Cape Town’s Waste Economy (2017). The HBBC bought and sold recyclable material including paper and plastics. It also rented wooden trolleys to informal waste collectors for a refundable fee. With these trolleys reclaimers were able to transport between 150-200 kg of recyclable material in each load.

The HBBC was located in two areas:
- The Office/Processing area was located at 115 Harrington Street; and
- The Buy-back centre was located in a garage at the Service Dining Room at 18 Canterbury Street.

The recyclable material was bought at the Service Dining Room where it was checked, sorted and then weighed. Although the material was temporarily stored on site, it was moved at the close of business to the Harrington Street Facility (GreenCape, 2017: 5-6). There it was baled and prepared for selling.

According to the GreenCape Report, the HBBC differed from most buy-back centres. Its recycling model had two components:
- It offered a free recycling collection service to surrounding businesses;
- It assisted the informal collectors by facilitating greater access to recyclables.

These offerings meant that it played an important part in waste diversion in the city.
3. Benefits
The model generated many benefits for reclaimers and for the City:

- **Accessibility:** For reclaimers, often subject to long travelling distance with their recyclable material, the centre was conveniently located in the CBD. This meant easy access and allowed reclaimers to spend less time, effort and money on transportation.

- **Measuring impact:** Using biometric recognition, it enabled records on types, tonnages and rand value to be recorded for each reclamer.

- **Inclusive approach:** It allowed reclaimers without ID documents to utilise the services of the buy-back centre.

- **Incentivising reclaimers:** It allowed HBBC to identify who the most reliable reclaimers were and to work with them by giving them greater responsibilities. These reclaimers became known as ‘reliable collectors’ or ‘HBBC Agents’ (GreenCape, 2017: 7).

- **Capacity building:** The centre also provided the reclaimers with skills training and social services.

4. Closing down the HBBC
In 2015, on the basis of a zoning complaint, the Harrington Street facility was closed down. The HBBC continued operating in Alfred Street using the Service Dining Room and the Salvation Army facilities. However, the tonnages declined. Although HBBC tried to increase the tonnage through the use of a shipping container, objections regarding the nuisance factor were received which required further changes to locality. Location was a significant factor in the decrease in tonnage. This was made worse by some collector unreliability. It meant that the HBBC did not meet their minimum breakeven target between 23 May 2016 and 31 June 2016. The HBBC management tried a series of interventions to try and save the business, but these ultimately failed.

The Harrington Buyback Centre Sub Council Report of 20 January 2016 of the City of Cape Town lays out the reasons for the closure of the HBBC.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of the waste minimization service, the Planning Department argued that the location of the recycling centre was not suitable for the area. Although the zoning scheme for the neighbourhood allowed for mixed use - residential, business and industrial uses - the zoning scheme did not have a definition of a recycling centre. As a result, the closest definition was for a scrapyard which was deemed more appropriate for an industrial zone (which are usually far from the CBD). Complaints were received from the surrounding buildings regarding the influx of ‘homeless people, no ablution facilities and no attempts to address the social concerns.’ Ultimately, due to a road widening scheme, the Planning Department argued that over time the building would be redeveloped as either a residential or office building which was considered more appropriate for the area.

The HBBC illustrates the shortcomings of planning regulations in South African cities and the inability of city planning schemes in many instances to support the informal economy.

5. Questions
- Should planning schemes be revised to accommodate informal reclaiming activities?
- Did the City of Cape Town make the appropriate planning decision to close down the recycling centre on the basis of it not fitting into a primarily residential street?
- How important is a well located sorting facility and what role does transport play in improving reclamer working conditions?

Discussion Points
- Discuss the difficulties of changing the zoning scheme in your city/municipality.
- Discuss how waste reclaimers can be better accommodated in well located areas of the city.
- Discuss the effectiveness of the HBBC recycling model.