

# Reclaiming Livelihoods

The role of reclaimers in municipal waste management systems



groundwork

# **Reclaiming Livelihoods:**

## **The role of reclaimers in municipal waste management systems**

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### **Cover credit:**

Front Cover: A waste reclaimer walks across the Sasolburg Landfill.

Back Cover: A waste reclaimer drags her pickings across the landfill in Sasolburg.

Photos by Melanie Samson



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Garbage. In today's consumer society we produce tons of it each day. But it is stinky and messy and most of us prefer not to think about it. Those lucky enough to have weekly collection services put their bins outside their doors and come home at the end of the day to find that the rubbish has been made to disappear. Others without these services place their garbage in collective skips or deposit it in the many illegal dumping sites that dot the urban landscape. Very few people who live in South African cities have ever visited their local garbage dump to see what happens to the commodities that they have decided are no longer of any value to them.

But for a growing number of people what others have deemed garbage provides an important source of livelihood. Early in the mornings if you drive or walk through South Africa's streets you will see legions of reclaimers rummaging through bins looking for goods that they can use themselves or sell to others. Most people prefer not to see them, and look down on them for doing such "dirty" work. Many municipalities consider them to be a nuisance and are trying to get rid of them. But these street reclaimers, together with their counterparts who sort through the ever growing heaps of waste at municipal landfills have found that by turning garbage back into commodities they have created an innovative way to support themselves and their families within a context where few can hope to find a job. They are also making important contributions to environmental sustainability by reducing the amount of waste that goes to landfills and providing inputs for recycling processes.

Remarkably little is known about reclaimers in South African cities and scant attention is being paid to them as municipalities are beginning to try to implement "sustainable waste management systems". To date reclaimers have not been mentioned in any South African legislation. The Polokwane Declaration that emerged out of the first national waste summit in 2001 commits government, business and communities to reducing waste generation and disposal by 50% and 25% respectively by 2012 and to achieving zero waste by 2022. Although clause 15 includes a specific commitment to, "[p]romote employment and economic empowerment opportunities, in particular in Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises, through increased product reuse and material recycling" no reference is made to either the existence of reclaimers or their current contributions to sustainable waste management.<sup>1</sup> This is in line with the erasure of reclaimers from legislation governing waste management in South Africa. In her insightful review of the current policy context Benjamin (2007) notes that

<sup>1</sup> Polokwane Declaration on Waste Management, [http://www.environment.gov.za/ProjProg/WasteMgmt/Polokwane\\_declare.htm](http://www.environment.gov.za/ProjProg/WasteMgmt/Polokwane_declare.htm) (last accessed November 11, 2008).



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although the National Environmental Management Act, 107 of 1998 endorses recycling as a key element of waste minimization strategies it does not recognize the role of what she refers to as “scavengers” in existing recycling processes. As Benjamin observes, “[t]he lack of recognition for scavenging from the highest environmental legislation of the country presents significant tensions with other policy documents....These policy documents mention scavenging and ways to handle or regulate this work but without placing a legally binding obligation on those who are responsible for waste management, including the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism” (Benjamin 2007, 39). Moreover, when it comes to policy implementation, although the Minimum Requirements for Disposal of Waste by Landfill allow individual landfill site managers to decide whether to allow salvaging on their sites, managers who do so must indemnify the department from any responsibility, creating a strong disincentive for the legitimization of reclaimers (Benjamin 2007, 7-9).

After successful lobbying by groundWork and other civil society organizations the Waste Bill currently under consideration represents some improvement in this situation. The Bill seeks to develop sustainable waste management systems across the country and promotes the reduction, re-use and recycling of waste. It recognizes that waste can be a valuable economic resource and that, “the impact of improper waste management practices are [sic] often disproportionately borne by the poor” (Republic of South Africa 2007a). It is therefore ironic that initially the Bill contained no reference to the growing number of informal reclaimers who support themselves by recycling waste material and did not include any mechanisms to improve their status within waste management systems. However, groundWork and allies intervened and the proposed amendments to the Bill now stipulate in section 51(1) that, “[a] waste management license must stipulate (i) if applicable, the conditions in terms of which salvaging of waste may be undertaken” (Republic of South Africa 2007b). Once the Bill is enacted this will represent the first time that reclaimers are officially recognized within legislation. The Bill does not, however, stipulate when salvaging should be permitted or how this should be done. Continued mobilization by reclaimers, groundWork and others advocating for reclaimers’ rights will be required to ensure that regulations are developed that require municipalities to engage with reclaimers and involve them in municipal waste management systems, and that this is realized in practice.

This would amount to a significant change in government’s current orientation towards reclaimers. For, whilst reclaimers are rendered virtually invisible in the sphere of legislation, key waste management documents that do refer to them make it clear that it is government’s intention to actually eliminate reclaimers themselves in the long term (Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism and Department of Water Affairs 1999). Government is correct in identifying that salvaging at landfill sites has problematic health and safety implications. However, advocating its elimination without a clear process to ensure that reclaimers are involved in future recycling initiatives threatens to undermine the livelihood strategies of people who are already struggling to support themselves and their families.

This report focuses on the contributions of reclaimers to social and environmental sustainability. It explores the work that reclaimers do, how they use salvaging of commodities from the waste stream as a way to support themselves, and how they are being affected by municipal waste management policies. The report is based on research conducted for groundWork in three municipalities – Msunduzi in Kwa Zulu Natal, Metsimaholo in the



Free State Province, and Emfuleni in Gauteng. Preliminary research was conducted when the report author, Melanie Samson, accompanied Victor Munnick and David Hallows on their research for the 2008 groundWork Report. The fieldwork for this report was conducted by Samson with the assistance of the groundWork waste campaigner, Musa Chamane, as well as Moleleki Fantisi, Themba Mojikang and Zodwa Mtambo from the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance.

Each of the three municipalities studied has adopted a different approach to reclaimers. In Msunduzi the municipality has tried, unsuccessfully, to completely bar reclaimers from the New England Road Landfill, with devastating effects on their income. Metsimaholo allows the reclaimers to stay on the landfill, but only if they agree to sell their materials to a black economic empowerment company run by two local professionals. Whilst in the past they could decide to whom they wanted to sell or to negotiate the terms on which they relate to the recycling industry, this is no longer an option. They have been disempowered and their incomes have been reduced. Both Msunduzi and Metsimaholo have relied on force and security to compel the reclaimers to comply with their policies. Emfuleni has taken a more progressive approach. It is seeking to regularize reclaiming on the landfills and is assisting reclaimers working on the dumps and in the streets to transport their goods to the market. Whilst it engages respectfully with the reclaimers and is creating space for them within the waste management system the reclaimers are not active participants in determining the vision and structure of the waste management system.

The next three chapters of this report tell the stories of each of these municipalities in turn, teasing out the main characteristics and effects of the models adopted. Chapter Five draws out key issues from across the case studies, and Chapter Six provides recommendations based on the findings. It is hoped that this report will help to bring reclaimers into view and provide reclaimers, policy makers and activists with insights that can facilitate the development of waste management systems that advance the status and positions of reclaimers within society and the economy.



# Chapter 2

## Locked out: Msunduzi's Attempt to Eradicate Reclaiming

### Introduction

The Msunduzi municipality was formed in 2000 when the Pietermaritzburg-Msunduzi transitional local council (TLC) was merged with the Ashburton TLC, Vulindlela, and Bishoptowe. Pietermaritzburg is the capital of KwaZulu Natal. Msunduzi is presently part of the uMgungundlovu District Council, but has applied to be recognized as a metropolitan council.

A large number of reclaimers formerly earned their living working on Msunduzi's New England Road landfill. The Minimum Requirements for Disposal of Waste by Landfill do not allow reclaimers to be on site unless reclaiming has been formalized and permission has been granted in the landfill permit. As this has not been done at the New England Road landfill the municipality sees the reclaimers as illegal and illegitimate and has taken extremely harsh measures to completely remove them from the landfill. Now they are only able to sneak onto the landfill for a few hours each day, with devastating effects on their livelihoods. Msunduzi is currently starting to formalize recycling in the city. It has granted a tender to a company to develop a composting and materials recovery facility at the New England Road landfill. It is also scheduled to start a pilot project collecting paper from households in the up-market neighbourhood of Chase Valley. The municipality has requested that some of the existing reclaimers be hired by the company granted the contract at the landfill. Other than that reclaimers have been completely sidelined from the processes to formalize recycling.

This case study explores why the municipality has denied reclaimers access to the landfill, the measures that it has taken to try to enforce this, and the effects that this has had on reclaimers' ability to sustain themselves. It also identifies concerns with the ways that the new recycling projects are being conceptualized. The case study highlights that efforts to exclude reclaimers from recycling processes not only have negative socio-economic effects, but are also costly and not likely to succeed in eradicating reclaiming.

Initial fieldwork was conducted as part of the groundWork report research team interviews held on May 20 and 21, 2008. A second round of fieldwork was conducted between September 20 and 24, 2008. The fieldwork included thirteen semi-structured interviews with waste management officials from Msunduzi and uMgungundlovu, SAMWU shop stewards, security



guards at the landfill site, reclaimers working at the landfill, management from Central Waste Paper recycling company, and representatives from the Sobantu community. In addition, four focus groups were held with reclaimers working at the landfill. Unfortunately due to time constraints it was not possible to conduct interviews or focus groups with reclaimers working on the streets in Chase Valley.

### **The New England Road Landfill**

In 2007 the population of Msunduzi was 616, 730 (Msunduzi Municipality 2008, 38). Like many municipalities Msunduzi has still not been able to extend services to all areas of the municipality. It currently collects waste from 63,000 households. Collection is primarily done by unionised municipal workers. However, a small number of public-private partnerships with private companies and community groups collect waste in several townships and informal settlements. In addition, the Siyazenzele “food for waste” project provides residents in three informal settlements with grocery hampers in exchange for collecting waste in their areas.<sup>2</sup>

Informal dumping is recognized as a significant problem in the Msunduzi Integrated Development Plan or IDP (Msunduzi Municipality 2008, 131). All of the waste that is collected goes to the New England Road landfill site, which is located next to the township of Sobantu. The landfill also receives waste from Greytown and the uMshwathi Municipality (McNeill, Holdcroft, and King 2004, 3-5 - 3-6). It is estimated that the landfill received 62,750 tonnes of waste in 2006. However, as neither the weighbridge nor the computer programme to track waste received are functional, this is not necessarily a reliable figure.

The landfill was created in 1956. It was more of an informal dump until it was lined in 1993. At this stage it received its first permit, which was subsequently amended in 1998. Chronic underfunding led to a number of problems at the landfill identified in external audits. These included: collapse of the leachate collection system; problems with the gas capture and flaring system; inadequate cover material; insufficient machinery and vehicles; inadequate monitoring of air quality; and breaks in the fence that allowed reclaimers access to the site. With financial assistance from the District Council many of these problems have been addressed in recent years.<sup>3</sup> However, the holes in the fence remain and reclaimers continue to have some limited physical access to the site.

The permit does not allow salvaging on the landfill. Benjamin notes that the 2005 IDP does not mention reclaimers (2007, 51), and neither does the 2008-2012 IDP (Msunduzi Municipality 2008). However, reclaimers have been working on the site virtually since its opening. Older members of the community in Sobantu have fond memories of going to the dump as children to find chocolates discarded by the local Nestle factory.<sup>4</sup> Reclaimers estimate that in the recent past there were 500 people working on a regular basis at the landfill.<sup>5</sup> When Benjamin conducted research at the landfill in early 2007 she found over 200

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Cyril Naidoo and Richard Rajah, September 22, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Riaz Jogiat, May 20, 2008, Interview with Cyril Naidoo, May 21, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Sobantu representatives, May 21, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with reclaimers, September 22, 2008.



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reclaimers, including 50 children (Benjamin 2007, 51). However, by the time that fieldwork for this research was conducted in 2008 the reclaimers were officially barred from the site. Desperate for income, just over a hundred people regularly risk attack by security guards and sneak in early in the morning, at noon when the guards take a lunch break and in the brief hours after operations stop and before darkness sets in. This restriction on their access to the dump has had a dramatic effect on their livelihood.

### **Reclaiming commodities, reclaiming livelihoods**

The reclaimers at the landfill are divided into two groups. The first, larger group of around eighty is made up of people who come primarily from Sobantu. They gather on a daily basis at the back entrance to the landfill. At a meeting with this group held on September 23, 2008 the majority of reclaimers present were women. The group included four young boys of school-going age. Of the thirty-three reclaimers at the meeting eleven had been salvaging for between five and nine years, one had started salvaging fifteen years ago, and the veteran was in her twentieth year at the landfill.<sup>6</sup>

Historically these reclaimers salvaged a wide range of materials. They collected paper, plastic, scrap and glass which they sold to Central Waste Paper, the main purchaser of recyclable materials in Msunduzi. They would save up their materials until they had enough to sell and would then call Central Waste Paper to come and collect their goods. The company would transport the reclaimers with their materials to its office, and the reclaimers would be paid per kilogram for each different type and grade of material.<sup>7</sup> However, according to management at Central Waste Paper, around 3 or 5 years ago the municipal police tried to arrest their driver as he was coming off the dump for purchasing stolen goods as they said that the waste on the landfill did not belong to the reclaimers. As a result Central Waste Paper stopped providing the reclaimers with transport and will only buy materials that they bring directly to the company.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to collecting goods which could be sold to producers who use recyclable materials as inputs in the formal economy, the reclaimers also collected goods for re-insertion into spheres of consumption and exchange. They collected a host of items that they could use in their households, ranging from pots and pans, to blankets, to washing detergent. Almost all of the reclaimers reported collecting food for personal consumption. They noted that the officials at the landfill would try to stop them from eating the food as they said it was contaminated. However, the reclaimers reported that they were careful in choosing what to eat and asserted that no one had become sick from eating food taken from the landfill. One woman reclaimer dismissed management using concern for their health as a justification for denying them access to food on the landfill stating, “they can say that it is not good for us. But they aren’t going to provide me with food. We eat because we are desperate”.<sup>9</sup> She said that although some people looked down on her for eating food from the landfill, when she returned to the township with things like rice or bread others would ask if they could buy excess food items from her.

<sup>6</sup> Meeting with reclaimers, September 23, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with reclaimers, September 22, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Timothy Ellis and Terry Ellis, September 22, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with women reclaimers, September 25, 2008.





The interviews and focus groups with the reclaimers revealed that indeed many had previously earned their livelihood by selling goods that they found on the landfill for re-use. A remarkably wide range of commodities was sourced from the landfill and re-inserted into exchange relations in the informal economy. The list of goods referred to by the reclaimers provided an interesting window into Msunduzi's formal economy. As companies producing fertilizer and chicken feed would dispose of contaminated or spoiled goods at the dump there was a thriving secondary market in these commodities. Some reclaimers specialised in collecting chicken feed and had regular customers whom they would contact by cell phone when sufficient quantities could be sourced from the landfill. Other, primarily male, reclaimers focused on collecting discarded building materials. One who comes from a nearby rural area would wait until he had collected sufficient materials and would then hire a truck to transport them back to his village for sale there.<sup>10</sup> In a sense the landfill acted as a redistribution point through which goods discarded from the formal economy could be re-circulated, connecting the formal and informal economies, different parts of the city, and even urban and rural areas.

In the era when reclaimers had unfettered access to the landfill they could earn a good living from their labour. Several noted that they had managed to put their children through school and had earned enough that their children did not need to work at the landfill to supplement their income. Earnings varied widely depending on the type of materials collected and the length of time worked each week. Although some reclaimers earned as little as R200 per week, most estimated that they earned between R800 and R1000 per week and some earned as much as R2000<sup>11</sup>.

The second, smaller group of reclaimers currently associated with the landfill is made up of around twenty young men who come from areas other than Sobantu. These reclaimers range in age from eighteen to their early thirties. Of the six who participated in the focus group five had previously held other jobs. All had some level of formal education, ranging between standard three and standard eight. Most started working at the landfill in the past three years after losing their jobs. The majority of the fifteen or so men who were observed waiting to enter the landfill were wearing work overalls that they said they had either purchased or had found on the landfill itself. They clearly treated this as a job.

These young men congregate on a daily basis at the front entrance to the landfill. They say that this is for pragmatic reasons - at the front gate it is possible to try to stop cars and go through their materials before they enter the landfill, they can sometimes get odd jobs helping private drivers to unload their rubbish, and on the main road that passes by the entrance it is easier to arrange transport to take their materials to buyers. In addition, there are more amenities at the front of the landfill. There is a woman who sells food and cigarettes near the entrance and the reclaimers can also access water and toilets at the nearby golf course which is not fenced.<sup>12</sup> However, it is clear that the young men also choose to gather separately from the reclaimers from Sobantu due to historical tensions between the two groups. These tensions are partially rooted in differences related to age and community of origin. In addition, each group accuses

<sup>10</sup> Focus group with reclaimers, May 20, 2008; Interview with reclaimers, September 22, 2008, Interview with women reclaimers, September 25, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Focus group with reclaimers, May 20, 2008; Interview with reclaimers, September 22, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Focus group with scrap reclaimers, September 26, 2008.



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the other of stealing from them.<sup>13</sup> The landfill site supervisor reported that in 2006 the two groups physically fought with one another.<sup>14</sup> According to all accounts the groups now have better relations with one another and both attend meetings convened by groundWork (see below for further discussion of these meetings). However, for the time being they prefer to maintain different gathering points and do not socialise or cooperate with one another.

Unlike the reclaimers from Sobantu the young men collect only scrap metal. They say that they chose to collect scrap as the women reclaimers from Sobantu collect paper and plastic and they did not want to compete with them. However, it is also important to note that scrap is far more lucrative than other recyclable items. Due to their physical strength the young men are able to both carry greater loads and muscle out the women and older men from Sobantu. Several women reclaimers noted that they do not collect scrap as they are afraid of the young men.<sup>15</sup> Previously, when they had relatively unlimited access to the landfill the scrap reclaimers worked full days, five or six days a week. They would be able to collect enough material to sell each day and earned R800-R900 per week.<sup>16</sup>

### Rangers on patrol

There have always been ebbs and flows in the reclaimers' access to the landfill. In 2004 uMgungundlovu District Municipality spent a million rand to erect a military style barricade around the landfill. This succeeded in keeping the reclaimers out for a while. However, they soon managed to cut holes in the fence and management alleges that they even stole the cabling and sold the wire as scrap.<sup>17</sup>

But things changed dramatically in October 2007. The municipal security guards who had previously guarded the landfill had been largely ineffective at keeping the reclaimers out. One day, without any forewarning, a new set of security guards arrived. They were dressed in khaki, carried sjamboks and immediately made it clear to the reclaimers that they were no longer welcome on site. These guards are also employed by the Msunduzi Municipality. However, they come from the division that also guards the forests and parks. They were sent one day as the regular security was not available. The foreman noticed that they were much more active and that instead of just sitting at the gate or driving around in cars they actively patrolled the landfill on foot. He thought that they would be much more effective in keeping out the reclaimers and so he requested that they be permanently deployed to guard the landfill.<sup>18</sup>

And effective they have been. They are not shy to use their sjamboks and many reclaimers have been "punished". The security guards report that, "we don't punish them anymore. They have understood".<sup>19</sup> In addition to using physical force the security guards have taken it upon themselves to meet and talk with the reclaimers to make clear both why they are not allowed

<sup>13</sup> Focus group with scrap reclaimers, September 26, 2008; Interview with reclaimers, September 22, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Hector Molefi, September 23, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Focus group with women reclaimers, September 25, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Focus group with scrap reclaimers, September 26, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Cyril Naidoo, May 21, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Innocent Mhlongo, September 25, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with security guards, September 23, 2008.



on the site and the way that they will be dealt with if they try to enter. One of the security guards explained why they meet with them saying:

“We discuss with them. Because they are not animals. We are not enemies. We talk to them outside. We are not supposed to make a meeting with them. No-one told us to meet with them. We just decided. We have general talks. We talk about the food on the landfill, that they shouldn't eat it. And about the trucks and the customers and explain that this is why they cannot come here”.<sup>20</sup>

The reclaimers have, indeed, understood the new regime at the landfill. As one explained, “now you are not allowed to enter. If you do, you get whipped. A lot of people have been attacked”.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, as this is their only source of livelihood the reclaimers have not just accepted defeat and walked away. Driven by hunger and poverty they risk attacks and each day they attempt to gain access to the landfill through holes that they have made in the fence. Although there is 24 hour security the rangers in khaki are only there during regular working hours. The reclaimers sneak onto the landfill in the morning before eight, at noon when the security are on lunch, and after four pm. Some also dare to enter when the security guards are patrolling as it is not possible for the guards to cover the entire landfill. But, if they are caught they can be beaten. Reclaimers report that not long ago one of the scrap reclaimers was shot as he was trying to escape over the fence. There are three groups of security guards who do two-day rotations on the landfill each week. It seems that some are more lenient than others, and reclaimers know which days it is safer to take a chance. They also know that Wednesday is the peak point for collection when more valuable materials are brought onto the landfill, and management is aware that they make greater efforts to access the waste on this day.<sup>22</sup>

### Misery and loss of livelihoods

The radical restriction in their access to the landfill has had a dramatic effect on the way that the reclaimers work and on their earnings. In the past the reclaimers could store their materials on site until they had amassed enough to sell. Now they must cart what they can off of the landfill each day. This means that either they can only take what they can carry or they have to forfeit an even greater percentage of their meagre income to pay for transport on a more regular basis. As everyone scrambles to get what they can in the brief period that they are on the landfill there is even greater jostling around the vehicles that arrive during lunchtime. The compressed time has therefore increased health and safety hazards for the reclaimers.<sup>23</sup> Other tensions have emerged as some reclaimers befriend and even potentially bribe the guards so that they will let them on site. Some of the reclaimers condemned this practice as they said it was dividing them and they needed to take a collective approach to dealing with their problems.<sup>24</sup> The changes have, however, also led to some new forms of cooperation. For example, the scrap reclaimers reported that they now tend to work together in small groups so that they can go through more materials and be assured of getting at least a little something each trip.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Interview with security guards, September 23, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with reclaimers, September 22, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Cyril Naidoo, May 21, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with reclaimers, September 22, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Focus group with reclaimers, May 20, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Focus group with scrap reclaimers, September 26, 2008.



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With so little time to labour the reclaimers find it virtually impossible to estimate how much they earn. It is all the luck of the draw. Some days they do not manage to find anything of value during the brief period when they can work. On others they may hit the jackpot – one day when we were conducting interviews two reclaimers emerged from the landfill with bags full of new, warm winter blankets. Undoubtedly they kept some for themselves and sold others in the informal economy for a reasonable amount of cash. The scrap reclaimers said that they now earn at most R150 per week, but at times it is much less.<sup>26</sup> The children use the money that they earn from collecting scrap to buy clothes for school, sweets, and to help their mothers purchase food. Widespread unemployment amongst adults in the townships has led these children to take up salvaging as their after-school job to supplement meagre family incomes.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, high levels of unemployment are the main reason why the reclaimers continue to gravitate to the landfill. When asked why they keep coming when conditions are so poor and they have such limited access they all noted that there is simply no other work. Some reported that they would try to find casual jobs in the mornings. If they were successful they would earn a bit of cash, and if they weren't they would come to the landfill and try to make what they could. Women noted that at least they could usually find some food to feed their families and could eventually scrape together enough materials to sell to be able to purchase pre-paid electricity for lights.<sup>28</sup> However, they yearn for the days when they could work a full day at the landfill and earned enough to support themselves and their families. When describing the first time he found the rangers blocking access to the landfill one reclaimer summed up the situation by saying that when the new security arrived, “that is when we started our misery.”<sup>29</sup>

### Turning a blind eye, failing to engage

The reclaimers find it inexplicable that the municipality is so determined to keep them off of the landfill. As one remarked, “we don't understand, because waste is waste. This is a dump. Everything that is thrown here is waste and it doesn't belong to anyone.”<sup>30</sup> Another reclaimer explained the effect that loss of access to the landfill has on their livelihood strategies stating, “we don't understand why people are not allowed to pick at the dump. People are not working, they don't have jobs, they don't have RDP houses. We don't understand. Because here at the dump you can get anything. You can get bricks, even concrete to build a house...”<sup>31</sup> The current situation is particularly tragic as although the municipality has plans to develop a recycling initiative at the landfill in the future, at present the precious commodities that the reclaimers could use to sustain their families are simply being compacted and buried in the ever-rising mounds of earth (although it should be noted that all parties acknowledge that some municipal employees working at the landfill earn extra income by recycling materials that they find on site).

<sup>26</sup> Focus group with scrap reclaimers, September 26, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Focus group with boy reclaimers, September 23, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Focus group with women reclaimers, September 25, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with reclaimers, September 22, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Focus group with scrap reclaimers, September 26, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with reclaimers, September 22, 2008.



The municipal officials in charge of waste management say that they are well aware of the reclaimers' desperate need for income generated from the landfill and that they are empathetic towards their plight. The landfill site manager acknowledged that they know that the reclaimers sneak onto the landfill during the day and after four in the afternoon. He explained that, "the reality is that we are not discouraging it [reclaiming] at a very high level. We have security at the site. But we are not being very vigilant. There is a lot more we can do. But we understand their predicament. That is why we leave them".<sup>32</sup>

### **Refusal to formally recognize reclaiming**

Whilst management is prepared to turn a blind eye for limited periods during the day they are not prepared to formalize and legitimize this arrangement by letting the reclaimers have proper access to the site or even negotiating with them when they can access the site. A host of problems with having reclaimers on site were identified. These included possible injury and death if trucks offloading waste hit one of the reclaimers scrambling around them searching for material, chaos as reclaimers direct trucks to offload in places other than the working face, inability to keep the dump tidy and orderly, health risks to reclaimers from eating contaminated food, hassling of customers coming to unload garbage, theft from customers, and theft of landfill equipment and material.<sup>33</sup> In management's mind the only solution is to bar the reclaimers from the landfill.

Management acknowledges that the reclaimers, "are very responsible people. They won't hijack you. The fact that they are there means that they are responsible".<sup>34</sup> However, they simply cannot foresee being able to develop an arrangement that would formally accommodate reclaiming on the site. The landfill manager explained that ideally the way forward would be to get the reclaimers to form SMMEs focusing on collecting different materials. But he identified a number of reasons why this wouldn't work: it would be impossible to maintain order and prevent groups from collecting materials allocated to others; it would be equally difficult to get reclaimers to stop eating food from the landfill; and the municipality would need to provide the reclaimers with health and safety equipment which would be a considerable expense. His overriding concern was that it would need to be a highly disciplined environment and he repeatedly questioned who would control the situation. He clearly did not think it would be possible to negotiate agreements with the reclaimers to put this type of initiative into effect.<sup>35</sup>

### **Creative ideas on formalization**

The supervisor at the landfill has a number of very practical ideas regarding how reclaiming work could be organized so that it doesn't interfere with operations on the landfill. He knows some of the reclaimers from the township and was impressed when he saw others in town, smartly dressed, purchasing food and goods for the festive season with money that they told

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Cyril Naidoo and Richard Rajah, September 22, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Innocent Mhlongo, September 25, 2008; Interview with Cyril Naidoo and Richard Rajah, September 22, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Cyril Naidoo and Richard Rajah, September 22, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Cyril Naidoo and Richard Rajah, September 22, 2008.



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him they made from the landfill. He thinks that they should be given a chance to work on the landfill in a structured, organized way. Reflecting on why this has never been done he remarked, “I have worked here for eleven years. If you go to the people who work in the office they will never understand. But if you will listen to people like us who work here and know, then it could work.”<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately no-one has ever asked his opinion.

### Failure to consult reclaimers

Seemingly no-one has asked the reclaimers either. Bizarrely, the hated security guards are the only group within the municipality who have actually taken it upon themselves to meet with the reclaimers. When the foreman at the landfill was asked whether he meets with the reclaimers he said, “I didn’t see the need of that [having a meeting]. If the person is not supposed to be inside you just need to lock them out. If they were allowed in then I could meet them.”<sup>37</sup> He repeatedly referred to the fact that the permit does not allow reclaimers to be on the landfill and raised concern that meeting them would legitimate their illegal presence on the site. The landfill manager was equally apprehensive. He reported that the only discussions that he has with the reclaimers are informal talks around health and safety issues and the burning of tires. His main concern is that, “once we engage in discussions with them then it seems as if we are willing to engage them. I am fully aware that they are engaged there now, but very informally”.<sup>38</sup> As management does not consider it possible to negotiate enforceable agreements with the reclaimers they therefore prefer to tolerate their presence informally and ignore their presence formally.

Even the South African Municipal Workers’ Union takes a narrow, legalistic approach to the reclaimers. The local shopstewards explained that they have never thought of recruiting or even meeting with the reclaimers as, “it is difficult to have relations with them as a union as they are not even on the municipal payroll”.<sup>39</sup> When pushed the SAMWU shospstewards said that if someone else organized a workshop or meeting with reclaimers they would be willing to go to share their experience and knowledge about health and safety issues. However, the thought of taking the initiative to meet with the reclaimers, let alone organize them and take up their struggles, did not occur to the shospstewards.<sup>40</sup> For their part, municipal waste managers said that they were open to receiving proposals from groundWork regarding how to deal with the reclaimers. But they do not see it as their responsibility to proactively develop such a plan and are not willing to invest their time in something that they think is unworkable.<sup>41</sup>

Riaz Jogiat, Acting Manager Municipal Functions, responsible for waste in the uMgungundlovu District Municipality does not think that it needs to be this way:

I have seen landfill sites where people who pick and the local municipality work together and try to benefit each other. But here there it is a state of cold war...

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Hector Molefi, September 23, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Innocent Mhlongo, September 25, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Cyril Naidoo and Richard Rajah, September 22, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with SAMWU shospstewards, September 21, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with SAMWU shospstewards, May 21, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Cyril Naidoo and Richard Rajah, September 22, 2008.



They [management] will always refer to the minimum requirements [for landfills] and say the minimum requirements forbid us from doing anything. The minimum requirements say it is undesirable, but the officials at provincial level say you can find ways of doing this... but when you say this, then the managers from Msunduzi will say the wastepickers are sabotaging the equipment. Then you say there is no way you can blame them. There is poor security at the site, you can't say it is the wastepickers... My own opinion is that there is an easy way for council to go through a process with the wastepickers, find out what they do and ways to move forward. But that won't happen. It cannot happen. This council will just build a bigger fence. This council spent R1 million on a fence. You go there now, it is gone. Because you can't keep people out".<sup>42</sup>

Jogiat attributes Msunduzi's approach to the general anti-poor, pro-business orientation of the council, and to the particular discrimination that reclaimers face due to the fact that they work with rubbish.<sup>43</sup> It should also be noted that unlike Jogiat who has a history in the NGO sector, both senior managers in the Msunduzi waste department have technical backgrounds and acknowledge that they have no skills or experience dealing with social issues.<sup>44</sup> Despite the fact that Jogiat has these skills and oversees waste management within the District he has little ability to intervene as local councils are responsible for operational issues. In addition, as the uMgungundlovu District Council is virtually bankrupt it cannot use financial support as a way to leverage policy changes at local level. Jogiat therefore relies on the power of persuasion and is attempting to slowly forge a consensus on key issues related to waste management through the innovative establishment of a waste management forum at the District level. For now this forum involves only officials, but he hopes once common positions are reached that it can be expanded to include business and community representatives.<sup>45</sup> In the meantime Msunduzi municipality is proceeding with two initiatives to formalize recycling that both completely marginalize reclaimers.

### Privatizing Recycling

Msunduzi currently has two processes underway to begin to formalize recycling in the municipality. The first initiative is the highly controversial awarding of a tender to a private company to develop composting and recycling facilities at the landfill. Approximately two years ago the municipality issued a call for tenders and the contract was awarded to Shoretech Environmental Services. According to the business plan the contractor will implement a three-phase project. In phase one Shoretech will establish a composting facility at the landfill that will process homogenous loads of organic waste. It will not sort through mixed waste due to the costs entailed. As such, any unsorted organic waste will still be sent to the landfill. Phase two is scheduled to start six months after the commencement of the project. In this phase Shoretech will subcontract SMMEs to sort recyclable materials from the waste, which will then be baled and sold to producers. Within three years of the start of the project Shoretech will commence phase three, which consists of the production of industrial panels from materials diverted from the landfill. No further details are provided regarding the nature

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Riaz Jogiat, September 23, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Riaz Jogiat, September 23, 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Cyril Naidoo and Richard Rajah, September 22, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Riaz Jogiat, September 23, 2008.



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of these panels or how they will be produced. Finally, the proposal also states that Shoretech will take over management of the entrance gate and weighbridge and will receive 10% of revenue collected as a management fee. The contract therefore encompasses much more than composting and recycling and entails privatization of core functions at the landfill (Shoretech 2006).

In terms of the tender document Shoretech is responsible for ensuring that an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is successfully conducted prior to the commencement of the project. For unknown reasons this process was only initiated in April 2008. The company is conducting a basic EIA, even though Riaz Jogiati believes that due to the amount of waste involved a full EIA is required. Only one public consultation meeting was held, on a Friday night, at the golf course. Jogiati, groundWork and SAMWU all cried foul. Jogiati lodged a formal complaint regarding the timing of the meeting, the conducting of only a basic EIA and failure of the company to provide relevant background documentation prior to the meeting. It took the consultants overseeing the process a month to provide Jogiati with the relevant documentation, and as of September 2008 he had still not received a response to his complaints, despite having registered the District as an interested and affected party.<sup>46</sup> None of the informants interviewed could provide information on the status of the EIA or of the contract as a whole.

Management in the Msunduzi waste management department said that they hoped that the composting and materials recycling facility project would assist the reclaimers by providing some of them with employment. However, they noted that they cannot force Shoretech to hire reclaimers, and in any event there will not be enough jobs for everyone. The Manager for Waste Management said that he thought the contractor would not have a problem letting the reclaimers continue to extract materials from the landfill. However, the Landfill Manager raised concerns that this may contravene the contract. Indeed, clause 5.1 of the proposal states that the Msunduzi municipality must provide Shoretech with, “[a]greement for exclusive access to all waste at the Msunduzi landfill site” (Shoretech 2006, 7). If and when the contract comes into effect the current informal arrangements will be prohibited and the reclaimers will lose all access to the site, unless an arrangement similar to that at the Sasolburg landfill (see chapter three) is secured in which reclaimers are forced to sell their materials to Shoretech. The contract will therefore have a profound effect on the reclaimers. Nevertheless, to date they have not been formally consulted about or involved in the initiative.

The second initiative is aimed at piloting separation at source and collection of recyclable materials from households. The upmarket area of Chase Valley has been selected for the project as due to income levels the residents generate larger quantities of high quality recyclable materials. They have also been mobilising for more environmentally friendly approaches to service delivery. The project is being designed as a public-private partnership between Msunduzi municipality, Central Waste Paper (which is the largest local purchaser of recyclable paper) and Mondi (one of the largest paper manufacturers in the country). Mondi has committed to purchasing the paper that is collected for three to five years. This will be critical to the success of the project as previous attempts to do separation at source

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Riaz Jogiati, September 23, 2008.





failed when prices crashed and the municipality could not sell the recyclable materials. At first Central Waste Paper will collect the paper itself. However, the intention is to eventually get black small, medium and micro enterprises to do the collection. They will sell the paper to Central Waste Paper who will then shred and bale it and sell it to Mondi. In this way the Council says the project will advance environmental goals and will also promote black economic empowerment.<sup>47</sup>

However, notions of black economic empowerment are limited to the small business sector and do not involve consideration for reclaimers. Municipal management acknowledges that there are people who currently go through the bins in Chase Valley before they are collected by municipal trucks. However, they have not made any efforts to meet with these reclaimers and find out what they collect, let alone conduct research into how the project will affect their livelihoods. When asked whether they thought it would be useful to do so management responded by saying, “if they are affected and complain we can incorporate them into the system”.<sup>48</sup> Once again management revealed that they do not see it as their responsibility to proactively engage with reclaimers and ensure that they have a voice in waste management initiatives that affect them.

It is highly unlikely that the individual reclaimers from Chase Valley will be empowered enough to figure out how the contract works and who to talk to in Council and the companies to demand their inclusion. However, recent attempts by reclaimers at the landfill to organize could, perhaps, serve as a platform for this type of broader organizing of reclaimers across the city.

### **Beginning to organize**

The reclaimers say that throughout their long history on the landfill they have never tried to form a committee or organization through which to address their concerns. However, in the past year they have started to organize to try to defend their rights. groundWork waste campaigner Musa Chamane, who is based in Msunduzi, has played a key role in this process. In late 2007 Chamane began calling meetings with the reclaimers. Reclaimers from both groups have been attending. They have elected a committee to represent them. They learned about the Landfill Monitoring Committee and began to attend meetings. Together with groundWork they insisted that the issue of reclaiming be placed on the agenda for discussion. However, the topic was repeatedly delayed, and the committee now only has the minimally required four meetings per year.<sup>49</sup>

For the moment their demands are quite basic. They insist that they should be allowed back onto the landfill. They are also requesting that they be provided with assistance to access identity documents, old age pensions and housing.<sup>50</sup> It is notable that they are legitimately entitled to these documents and benefits as South African citizens and it is an indictment on the state that fourteen years into democracy impoverished people are still struggling to

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Timothy Ellis and Terry Ellis, September 22, 2008; Interview with Cyril Naidoo and Richard Rajah, September 22, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Cyril Naidoo and Richard Rajah, September 22, 2008.

<sup>49</sup> Musa Chamane, personal communication.

<sup>50</sup> Focus group with reclaimers, May 20, 2008.



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access these rights. In a focus group discussion the reclaimers were divided on questions of tactics. Whilst some supported mobilizing to shut down the landfill in order to increase their bargaining power, others were afraid that this would further antagonize the municipality.<sup>51</sup> Through workshops and exchanges with other reclaimers facilitated by groundWork it is hopeful that they will be able to strengthen their organization, refine their demands, strategies and tactics, and deepen their ability to engage productively with the municipality.

### Conclusion

The situation in Msunduzi is dire for reclaimers and is poised to worsen with the implementation of the new recycling projects. Sticking to the letter of the Minimum Requirements officials in the waste management department see no option but to formally evict reclaimers from the site. Although empathy for the reclaimers leads them to turn a blind eye when the reclaimers sneak into the site this kind of informal arrangement is highly problematic. The reclaimers' working hours and earnings have been substantially reduced, the dangers associated with them being on site have not been addressed, and the reclaimers are denied the opportunity to actively participate in the governance of waste management in Msunduzi. Ironically, it is doubtful whether the official policy of eviction and non-recognition would minimize the legal liability of waste management officials if a reclaimer were injured or killed on site. This case demonstrates that in a context of exceptionally high unemployment it is impossible to prevent reclaimers from accessing landfill sites. Surely it would be less costly, more just and more democratic to develop proactive, inclusive policy processes related to recycling.



<sup>51</sup> Focus group with reclaimers, May 20, 2008.



# Chapter 3

## Claiming their place: the struggle against enclosure in Metsimaholo Municipality

### Introduction

Metsimaholo Municipality is located in South Africa's Free State Province. It includes Sasolburg, Zamdela, Viljoensdrif, Coalbrook, Deneysville and Oranjeville. The municipality has three landfills. The main landfill is the Sasolburg landfill. Two smaller ones are located in Deneysville and Oranjeville. Reclaimers have been working on the Sasolburg landfill for at least twenty years. They are well organized and have formed two organizations, both of which are registered as closed corporations. For brief periods in the past the reclaimers have negotiated the sale of their materials to some of the largest companies working in the Vaal region. However, rather than helping the reclaimers to expand and formalize their operations the municipality has opted to use a military fence to close off the landfill, grant a private company the sole right to sell recyclable materials retrieved from the landfill and force the reclaimers to sell only to this company. In the past this contract was held by a succession of white owned companies. Currently it has been granted to a small black-owned company owned by two professionals who have recently merged with a large, white owned recycling company.

The story of the Sasolburg landfill is one of how the municipality has failed to recognize the reclaimers as legitimate stakeholders in the waste management system. It tolerates their presence on the site as long as they know their place and will sell to those deemed worthy of holding the contract. It is a story of exclusion and marginalization at the level of municipal policy. But it is also the story of how the reclaimers are organizing themselves and fighting back to retain their right to remain on the landfill and to achieve their dream of running the recycling processes themselves.

The research on the struggles at the Sasolburg landfill was conducted between September 1 and September 10, 2008. It included two focus groups with representatives of the reclaimers' committees, twelve semi-structured interviews with reclaimers, municipal officials, a councillor, recycling companies and a local business representative, and numerous informal discussions with the reclaimers.



## Chapter 3: Claiming their place

### The Sasolburg “Landfill”

The Sasolburg Landfill is located 3.6 km from the town of Sasolburg. The town was founded in the 1950s to provide housing for skilled white workers employed by Sasol, while the township of Zamdela provided single sex accommodation for black male Sasol employees. With the decline of apartheid era influx control Zamdela became the home to many families. Currently more than 50% of Metsimaholo’s population of 173,448 resides there (Kwezi V3 Engineers 2008, 18). In 2006 Metsimaholo’s official unemployment rate was 33.4%, which was slightly below the national average (Metsimaholo Municipality 2008, 36). At present agriculture is the largest local employer, accounting for 30.7% of employment, and only 13.1% of employment is in the manufacturing sector (Metsimaholo Municipality 2008, 47). However, as will be elaborated below Sasol continues to dominate the political landscape and have tremendous influence over the local council.

The Sasolburg landfill was established in 1951. It receives domestic waste from Zamdela and Sasolburg, as well as industrial waste from the large number of factories in the surrounding area. The Integrated Waste Management Plan produced for the municipality states that the landfill receives 51 tonnes of waste per day (Kwezi V3 Engineers 2008, 51). However, as there is no weighbridge it is impossible to calculate the exact amount of waste entering the landfill site. According to the Assistant Manager Health and Cleansing Services for Metsimaholo once industrial waste is included it is likely that the landfill receives 90 tonnes of waste per day.<sup>52</sup>

Although Council refers to the site as a landfill, the term ‘dump’ is actually far more appropriate. The site is not permitted. It received a concept (or temporary) permit in June 1990. However, this is no longer valid.<sup>53</sup> The dump meets almost none of the requirements of a sanitary landfill. There is no weighbridge, cover material is inadequate, and a fence has only been erected in the past few months. Reclaimers report that hazardous waste is frequently dumped at the site<sup>54</sup> and in October 2008 the media reported that medical waste is also being dumped there. The dump is often cloaked in a cloud of smoke that rises from the fires that burn on a regular basis. There is one permanent municipal employee at the entrance who keeps records of vehicles entering the site, and one other permanent municipal worker with a bulldozer who toils alone to cover the rubbish. Over the course of the fieldwork no supervisors or municipal officials were seen at the dump, and there is virtually no municipal presence at the site.

### Reclaimers - Claiming the space of the dump

The dump is clearly the domain of the fifty or so primarily seSotho speaking South African reclaimers who work there on a daily basis. Upon arrival at the top of the dump visitors are usually greeted by two or three young men lounging on a sofa at the top of the hill. The reclaimers have salvaged a range of furniture from the dump, and outdoor living rooms and rest areas dot the landscape. When we were about to start the focus groups a sufficient

<sup>52</sup> Johann Labuschagne, personal communication.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Lusizi Thile, September 5, 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Focus Group with Ditamating Committee, September 2, 2008.



number of chairs and clean boxes and buckets to sit on were immediately procured for those who wanted them. In early 2008 the municipality finally succeeded in removing the shacks where some of the reclaimers lived on the dump itself. However a few structures remain where some of the reclaimers store their clothes, personal items and even files containing documents relevant to their struggles. Although there is no water or toilet facilities at the top of the site the reclaimers haul water from the bottom so that they can wash and change before heading home at night.

Walking around the dump one is immediately struck by the extent to which the reclaimers have organized the space and claimed it as their own. When the research was conducted the working face of the landfill was in the upper left hand corner from the entrance. When trucks arrive reclaimers rush to retrieve materials, which they then carry back to their individual working spots. The section closest to the entrance is the preserve of the young men who collect scrap metal. They have several couches and sitting areas (a few covered by umbrellas) where they sort their materials and sit and smoke when there is nothing to be done. Although the men now work individually they labour in close proximity to one another and are usually found in groups. As you progress deeper into the dump you find the individual workspaces of the older women and men who collect paper, plastics and cardboard. Each of these salvagers has his or her own individual workplace, which is clearly demarcated by the large white sacks that he or she fills with recyclable materials. There is less furniture and fewer collective spaces in this zone of the dump. Although the reclaimers from the two groups pass through each others' spaces and sometimes rest or labour near one another there is a clear spatial division between the two groups. As will be further elaborated below this is a physical manifestation of the tensions and organizational divisions between the two groups that are based on gender, age, the type of labour that they perform, and their vision for reclaiming on the landfill.

Reclaimers have been salvaging recyclable material from the dump since at least the 1980s. While a small number of reclaimers interviewed have worked on the dump for more than fifteen years the majority had taken up the work of reclaiming more recently, within the past eight years. Echoing findings from other parts of the country and around the world it would seem that as unemployment has risen due to neoliberal restructuring salvaging has become an increasingly important livelihood strategy for those excluded from the realm of wage labour (see for example, Medina 2007; Millar 2006; Webster et al. 2007). Contrary to the common assumption that reclaimers have low levels of education many of the younger men have high proficiency in English and have completed some secondary education. Most of the older men and women who were interviewed had previously held other employment. As one of the scrap metal reclaimers noted, they are doing this work as, "it is just that we see there are no jobs and we must make our own".<sup>55</sup>

### Early Efforts to Enclose the Dump

In some senses Metsimaholo is in the vanguard of efforts to formalize recycling initiatives. Whilst many South African municipalities are only now seeking to extend the scope of their waste management systems to include recycling, this expansion of the public sphere was first attempted in Metsimaholo in a much earlier period. Since the beginning the local council

<sup>55</sup> Interview with metal reclaimer, September 3, 2008.



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has chosen to incorporate recycling indirectly through a public-private partnership. As will be demonstrated below it is, however, only in the past few months that the Council has succeeded in enclosing the landfill and fully transferring property rights to the garbage to the contract holder.

No-one can state precisely when the first contract granting a company exclusive right to recycle materials from the dump was awarded. However, two informants (one salvager and one municipal official) who have been on the site for more than twenty years both stated that such contracts were in place when they arrived at the dump. According to these informants, for many years the contract was held by a white-owned company known as Spooke. Spooke was succeeded by another white-owned company named A-Z Recycling. In terms of their contracts these companies were to pay the municipality (a rather minimal) rent in return for the right to extract recyclables from the dump. The actual work of reclaiming recyclable materials was performed by the informal reclaimers, who technically were only allowed to remain on site if they sold their materials to the company holding the contract. However, the Manager of Health and Cleansing Services for Metsimaholo reported that the terms of the contracts were never fully realised. As the municipality failed to fence the site and provide adequate security the companies could not establish their claim to the physical space of the dump. Although by all accounts the paper, plastic and cardboard reclaimers mainly sold to the contract holders, they could also arrange transportation to sell their goods to middlemen offering higher prices in other locations, or could sell to middlemen who made it onto the dump itself. According to the scrap reclaimers A-Z did not deal in scrap, and so they developed an ongoing relationship with a white middleman whom they referred to as Thabo.<sup>56</sup> As Spooke and A-Z's ability to be the only buyer (or "monopsony"<sup>57</sup> power) was not realized the companies refused to pay rent for the space.<sup>58</sup> Neither company developed any recycling infrastructure at the dump. In this period inclusion of recycling in the public sphere amounted to nothing more than placing tremendous pressure on the reclaimers to sell to one particular middleman.

### Regaining Control, Organizing Collectively

Presumably due to insufficient profits in around 2004 A-Z abandoned its operations at the dump three years into its five year contract.<sup>59</sup> This vacuum created space for the reclaimers to begin to assert control over the sale of their products. Based on the advice of a municipal official in the health and cleansing department the reclaimers dealing with paper, cardboard and plastic made contact with DJ Afvalpapie, one of the largest purchasers of these materials in the region. They negotiated for DJ to provide them with skips and collect their materials on a regular basis.<sup>60</sup> The scrap reclaimers realized that by bargaining with different middlemen they could obtain higher prices. Rather than selling to only one buyer they developed

<sup>56</sup> Interview with metal reclaimer, September 3, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> A monopsony is a market similar to a monopoly except that a large buyer not seller controls a large proportion of the market. The buyer uses this market power to drive the prices down. A monopsony is sometimes referred to as the buyer's monopoly.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Lusizi Thile, September 5, 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Johann Labuschagne, September 3, 2008; Interview with metal reclaimer, September 3, 2008.

<sup>60</sup> Interview, with male paper reclaimer, September 3, 2008.



relationships with three different purchasers of their materials. They also began to work and sell their goods collectively. As they were selling in bulk they managed to obtain higher prices and significantly increase their income.<sup>61</sup>

The reclaimers were now unofficially in charge of the recycling processes at the dump. They aspired to formalise their place within the waste management system and have their role recognized in the public sphere. Both groups of reclaimers assert that during this period they were told by the Assistant Manager for Health and Cleansing Services that if they wanted to receive the contract then they would have to form a collective as the contract could not be given to individuals. There are longstanding tensions between the older women and men who collect paper, plastics and cardboard, and the young men who collect scrap, with the former alleging that the latter are ill-disciplined and disrespectful and that the young men poach their materials. As a result they did not invite the young men to join them when they formed their organization and two separate groups were formed on the dump. The reclaimers who work with plastic, paper and cardboard are part of the Ikageng<sup>62</sup> Landfill Committee while the scrap reclaimers are organized as Ditamating<sup>63</sup> Scrap Metal Project. Both organizations are now registered as closed corporations.<sup>64</sup> The municipal officials deny that during this period the reclaimers were organised or indicated an interest in obtaining the contract for themselves.<sup>65</sup> What is, however, undisputed is that the reclaimers were neither informed nor consulted when a new contract was awarded without having been advertised or put out for public tender. Apparently it did not occur to the municipal officials and councillors involved that the informal reclaimers who actually performed the labour of salvaging materials from the dump and who had been effectively running the recycling processes for an extended period of time should be seen as stakeholders in this public policy process.

### **Black Economic Empowerment – Empowering Professionals, Marginalizing Reclaimers**

In 2006 a five year contract was signed with Phutang, a company owned by two black, male professionals from Zamdela. By their own admission neither had any real experience with recycling. Their only history in the sector was one's role as a senior member in an initiative to promote recycling in the schools, a position he held due to his employment as a teacher in a primary school in Zamdela.<sup>66</sup> However, these aspirant entrepreneurs saw an opportunity to make money from recycling. They approached Council to obtain the right to recycle at the landfill and requested financial assistance from Sasol to help them start the business. According to a representative of Sasol once the entrepreneurs had received in

<sup>61</sup> Interview with metal reclaimer, September 3, 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Ikageng means "build ourselves" in seSotho.

<sup>63</sup> Ditamating means "place of tomatoes" in seSotho. The committee picked this name as it is the nickname for Sasolburg due to the large number of tomatoes grown in the area. They said that choosing this name would help to ensure that the committee is seen as a local initiative.

<sup>64</sup> Focus Group with Ikageng Committee, September 2, 2008; Focus Group with Ditamating Committee, September 2, 2008; Interview with metal reclaimer, September 3, 2008; Interview with male paper reclaimer, September 3, 2008; Interview with women paper reclaimers, September 3, 2008.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Johann Labuschagne, September 3, 2008; Interview with Lusizi Thile, September 5, 2008.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Peter Tau, September 5, 2008.



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principle agreement from Council Sasol assisted them in securing the necessary equipment.<sup>67</sup> Sasol cannot provide funding to entrepreneurs. It therefore channelled resources via the Vaal Regional Community Trust (of which Sasol is the main donor) for the donation of a container and pressing machine to Phutang as well as for the provision of an interest-free loan for the purchase of a bakkie. As the Vaal Regional Community Trust participates in a broader city-wide partnership programme between business and council known as Rejuvenation (of which Sasol is also the main donor), the project fell under the rubric of this initiative, and all parties interviewed save the representative of Sasol refer to Rejuvenation as the source of support received by Phutang. The manager of corporate affairs at Sasol, who is the deputy chairperson of the business chamber, also arranged for a well-established white businessman to act as an advisor and mentor to Phutang. With these human and physical resources in place the Sasol representative reports that Phutang was able to seal the deal with Council.<sup>68</sup> According to the Assistant Manager Health and Cleansing Services for Council the sequence of events was somewhat different, with Phutang first receiving the support and then Rejuvenation requesting that Council give them the contract.<sup>69</sup> Regardless of this disagreement about sequencing four things remain clear. First, Phutang had no relevant expertise in recycling or business more generally and prior to receiving support from Sasol/Rejuvenation had no access to capital required to run a business. Second, support from Sasol/Rejuvenation played a critical role in ensuring that Phutang received the contract. Third, the contract was awarded without being publicized or put out to tender. Fourth, the reclaimers were completely excluded from these processes and discussions. Support for “black economic empowerment” was cited by a council official as the reason why the contract was given to Phutang without going to tender,<sup>70</sup> something which the reclaimers, who are also black, find ironic. The reclaimers argue that, “if it is about empowering people then they must start with people from the site”.<sup>71</sup> However, this was not an option considered by Council, Sasol or Phutang.

Since obtaining the contract both directors of Phutang have remained in their full-time jobs and attempt to “run the business by cell phone and remote control”.<sup>72</sup> They have no hands-on experience with recycling. They have received some training to help them to identify different types of plastic from a member of the Plastics Federation of South Africa who was involved in the schools project and have not received any training with regard to recycling of scrap metal.<sup>73</sup> It is universally agreed, even by Phutang itself, that Phutang has failed to manage the recycling of materials from the dump. For an extended period of time it had insufficient cash flow, was unable to purchase the materials from the salvagers on a regular basis, and

<sup>67</sup> According to the Sasol Manager for Community and Government Relations there were three main reasons why Sasol supported the project. Sasol believed that the project would help to protect the environment and would create employment. Importantly, Sasol had a vested interest in improving management of the dump as it owns the vacant land directly in front of the entrance to the dump. Previously there had been problems with young reclaimers waiting on this land outside the gate and harassing community members who came to the dump. Many of these community members were employees who, according to the manager, complained about these activities. Sasol therefore wanted to intervene to bring order to recycling processes at the dump so as to protect its property as well as the interests of its employees (Interview with Zimbini Zwane), September 10, 2008.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Zimbini Zwane, September 10, 2008.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Johann Labuschagne, September 3, 2008.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Johann Labuschagne, September 3, 2008.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with metal reclaimer, September 3, 2008.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Zimbini Zwane, September 10, 2008.

<sup>73</sup> Interview, Peter Tau, September 5, 2008.





was on the verge of bankruptcy.<sup>74</sup> When Phutang did purchase materials from the reclaimers it did so at a significantly lower price than that which they had previously received. This is not surprising as Phutang sold to the same middlemen that the reclaimers had previously dealt with directly but was now taking a cut for itself. Although it is possible that Phutang managed to negotiate a higher price with paper, plastic and cardboard companies by selling in bulk it must be remembered that the scrap reclaimers had already achieved these economies of scale by selling collectively. The decrease in income reported by the reclaimers is in line with the findings from an international study by the ILO that privatization usually resulted in lower income for reclaimers as the private companies with monopsonies extract rent from the reclaimers (International Labour Organisation 2004, 22).

Due to the problems that it was encountering, for several months Phutang was completely absent from the site and the reclaimers continued to manage all processes related to salvaging on the dump. When left free from interference from the state, the police and monopsonistic private companies the reclaimers succeeded in working collectively, marketing their own goods and transforming and improving the terms on which they were articulated into the formal economy. By the beginning of 2008 both Ikageng and Ditamating had registered as closed corporations in order to assist their bids to take over the contract. Both have ambitions to formalize their activities. They believe that if they can win the contract they would be able to formalize their work and register for workman's compensation and unemployment insurance. They also stated that if they could be provided with assistance to purchase pressing machines and transport they would be able to expand their businesses and create employment for other people. Ditamating reported that it proposed to waste management officials to start a programme in the community to get households to separate waste at source, something which it would pursue if it had the opportunity. If granted the contract it also planned to hire a manager to help it run its operations professionally. The women in Ikageng dreamed that with formalization they would be able to create a fund to provide support to children in the community who could not afford school fees so that they would stop trying to come to the dump to earn money.<sup>75</sup>

According to the reclaimers Ditamating and Ikageng once again approached the municipality to have their role formalised, and they offered to pay the municipality rent for their access to the dump. However, they were informed that it was impossible to cancel the contract.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, when interviewed senior management responsible for waste in Council insisted that, despite the complete failure of Phutang to fulfil its contractual obligations the Council would not consider terminating the contract. They justified this by stating that as Council had not fenced the landfill and provided proper security it had failed to ensure Phutang's monopsony. As such it could not insist that Phutang meet its side of the contract. Evidently Council officials thought that physical enclosure and force were the only ways to ensure that the reclaimers sell their goods to Phutang. By their own accounts the only purpose of the few meetings held with the reclaimers was to inform them that they must behave appropriately on the dump and that they must sell their materials to Phutang. No attempts were made to

<sup>74</sup> Interview, Peter Tau, September 5, 2008.

<sup>75</sup> Focus Group with Ditamating Committee, September 2, 2008; Interview with women paper reclaimers, September 3, 2008; Interview with metal reclaimer, September 3, 2008.

<sup>76</sup> Focus Group with Ditamating Committee, September 2, 2008; Focus Group with Ikageng Committee, September 2, 2008.



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persuade them to agree to work with Phutang by addressing their concerns that they were being forced to sell their goods at a lower price and that their incomes were being decreased due to the imposition of Phutang as a middleman.<sup>77</sup>

Ditamating members report that they approached Phutang and suggested that as Phutang has no knowledge or experience in dealing with scrap they should give them a subcontract.<sup>78</sup> However, instead, of partnering with reclaimers who have intimate knowledge of scrap metal and have demonstrated their ability to negotiate with and deliver to large middlemen, in May 2008 Phutang merged with Remade, a large white owned recycling company with branches across the Southern African region. A primary attraction of merging with Remade was that it had financial capital to help pay off debts and run the business,<sup>79</sup> something which the reclaimers obviously could not offer on their own. However, it is important to note that despite its size Remade also has no knowledge or experience in dealing with scrap.<sup>80</sup>

Both Council officials and the Sasol representative had mixed feelings regarding the new partnership between Phutang and Remade, as it undermines the objective of black economic empowerment. However, they expressed palpable relief that finally it might be possible for the contract to run smoothly. Council officials are aware that recycling on the dump should be able to generate significant revenue and are eager to start benefiting financially from the deal. This is particularly so as the waste management department is chronically underfunded by Council and severely short of staff.<sup>81</sup> For its part Sasol has an interest in ensuring that the loan is repaid and that order is brought to the dump, which borders on land owned by the company.<sup>82</sup>

### **Militarization and Enclosure of the Dump**

The Council and Sasol are determined to do what is required to ensure that Remade-Phutang can flourish in the contract. Even before the merger they decided that it would be necessary to physically enclose the dump in order to force the reclaimers to sell to Phutang and ensure that the company benefited from its monopsony. The fence was also crucial if the Council was going to secure the cooperation of the police in this process. In the past Council had called the police on numerous occasions to physically remove the reclaimers. However, as there was no fence and minimal security, the reclaimers would simply wait a few days and then re-enter the site. As a result in May 2007 the police had informed Council that they were no longer willing to forcibly remove the reclaimers unless a fence was in place and they were issued with arrest warrants for the reclaimers.<sup>83</sup> Due to the perceived importance of the fence Sasol agreed to finance 60% of the costs of constructing a fence completely encircling the landfill.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Johann Labuschagne, September 3, 2008; Interview with Lusizi Thile, September 5, 2008.

<sup>78</sup> Focus Group with Ditamating Committee, September 2, 2008.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Peter Tau, September 5, 2008.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Leonard Loftus, September 2, 2008.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Johann Labuschagne, September 3, 2008; Interview with Lusizi Thile, September 5, 2008.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Zimbini Zwane, September 5, 2008.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with metal reclaimer, September 3, 2008; Interview Lusizi Thile, September 5, 2008.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Zimbini Zwane, September 10, 2008.



By the time that Phutang merged with Remade and the company was ready to assert its authority the fence was almost completed. The council and the company therefore took decisive action. In May 2008 Remade-Phutang insisted that all reclaimers on the site sign a contract in which they would agree to only sell their materials to Remade-Phutang, otherwise they would be evicted from the site. The reclaimers refused and embarked on industrial action in which for a period of several weeks they refused to sell to Remade-Phutang. A stand-off ensued as Remade-Phutang had deployed additional security to the gate, thus preventing the reclaimers from removing their materials from the site and selling to other middlemen. Neither the reclaimers nor Remade-Phutang could generate any income. On May 22 the reclaimers were summonsed by council to attend a meeting at 8 am on May 23, non-attendance of which, they were informed, would “leave the council with no option but to use its legal process to remove you out of the dumping site”.<sup>85</sup> The reclaimers attended the meeting and tried to raise their grievances. They once again refused to sign the contracts. The police were subsequently sent in with dogs and pepper gas to remove them. As noted above, this was not the first time that the police had been sent in. However, now that the dump was physically enclosed once the reclaimers were evicted they were aware that it would be much more difficult to re-enter the site. In addition, they had not earned any income in the preceding few weeks due to the standoff with Remade-Phutang, and the police did not let them take their possessions with them. The combination of the police and the fence broke the reclaimers’ ability to continue with their resistance. One reclaimer eloquently summarized the outcome of what she perceives as a hard-fought battle stating, “[w]e were chased away by the police on a Friday. We came back on Monday to surrender and sign the contract”.<sup>86</sup>

### **Putting salvagers back in their place, undermining livelihoods**

Since then an uneasy truce has been reached on the site. Almost all of the reclaimers have signed the contracts. Some insist that they did not sign, but as it is now impossible to sell to other middlemen, Remade-Phutang is allowing them to continue working on the site. Representatives of Council and Remade-Phutang all report that the “problems with the reclaimers” have been resolved and the contract is moving forward. Remade-Phutang has invested a substantial amount of money in establishing a sorting centre at the entrance of the landfill. Although Remade-Phutang and Council claim that the centre has created employment it should be noted that the one forklift driver and twelve general workers who sort the materials are employed indirectly via a labour broker and therefore have no job security with Remade-Phutang.<sup>87</sup>

Contrary to the perception that all of the issues have been resolved, the reclaimers report a litany of problems with Remade-Phutang. They insist that Remade-Phutang is continuing to pay them less than they received in the past. The contract requires Remade-Phutang to provide them with transport to move their goods to the sorting and buying centre that has been established at the entrance to the dump. However, by Remade-Phutang’s own admission, this does not happen on a regular basis as it does not have a dedicated vehicle at the site. The Remade-Phutang manager at the site also confirmed that Remade has no experience in

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Lusizi Thile, Manager Health and Cleansing, May 22, 2008.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with woman paper reclaimer, September 2, 2008.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Leonard Loftus, September 2, 2008.



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purchasing and selling scrap, and the prices which he provided do not differentiate between all of the different grades of particular types of metal. Contrary to the requirements of the contract Remade-Phutang has also still failed to provide the reclaimers with uniforms and safety equipment and sufficient access to water and toilets (only two toilets and one tap with a trickle of water are available at the entrance to the dump at the sorting centre).

The imposition of Remade-Phutang's monopsony means that the reclaimers are no longer free to decide who they sell their materials to. The plastics, paper and glass reclaimers say that their incomes have gone down from around R4000 per month to less than R3000 per month.<sup>88</sup> When the members of Ditamating were selling collectively they earned between R5000 and R6000 each per month and one member reported saving R1000 per month in a 32-day deposit account. They said that they now sell so infrequently and prices change so often that it is difficult to give a precise figure of monthly earnings. However, they all affirmed that their income has decreased substantially.<sup>89</sup>

In addition to lowering their incomes the forced relationship with Remade-Phutang removes the ability of the salvagers to negotiate the terms on which they relate to and potentially enter into the formal economy. The former South African president, Thabo Mbeki, argued that there are two economies in South Africa separated by a structural divide. Government is implementing a number of programmes to create bridges to help people move out of the so-called "second", informal economy into the "first" economy characterized by formal employment and integration into global markets<sup>90</sup> (ANC NGC 2005). Given the opportunity to pursue their vision the reclaimers would have provided a rare, successful example of this kind of shift. But instead Council has single-mindedly pursued an approach which has decreased their income and consigned them to remain as individual, informal reclaimers with no prospects to empower themselves, move into formal employment or grow their collective businesses. Remade-Phutang has no plans to empower the reclaimers, other than to teach them how to sort materials, something at which they are arguably already highly skilled.<sup>91</sup>

### Wasted Citizenship

Significantly for the scrap reclaimers Remade-Phutang required them to register and sell their materials individually. The company has therefore succeeded in undermining the previously collective approach of the members of the Ditamating Scrap Metal Project. Although they meet less frequently now both Ditamating and Ikageng continue to meet and try to strategize their next moves. They are wounded and bitter. They had believed the ANC campaign slogan and expected a "better life for all" with the advent of democracy. However, they report that they have lost faith in council and are tired of knocking on endless doors and not being taken seriously by the Council.<sup>92</sup> When asked what has changed since apartheid days one woman

<sup>88</sup> Focus Group with Ikageng Committee, September 2, 2008.

<sup>89</sup> Focus Group with Ditamating Committee, September 2, 2008.

<sup>90</sup> The concept of the two economies has been subjected to wide and penetrating critique. See the articles in the special edition of *Africanus* (Bond 2007) for an overview of key arguments demonstrating the conceptual flaws in framing the formal and informal economies as distinct entities.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Leonard Loftus, September 2, 2008; Interview with Peter Tau, September 5, 2008.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with metal reclaimer, September 3, 2008; Interview with women paper reclaimers, September 3, 2008; Focus group with Ditamating Committee, September 2, 2008.



reclaimer responded, that, “there is no change as the police still chase us away”.<sup>93</sup> Members of Ditamating observed that the imposition of Remade-Phutang not only compromised their rights as citizens to participate in the policy process, but also undermined their ability to fulfil their obligations as citizens noting that, “we are citizens of this city. We are expected to pay for services. We used to pay for services, now it is difficult.”<sup>94</sup>

### **“You are just a piece of scrap” – The devaluing of salvagers**

In seeking to explain why Council did not engage with them the scrap reclaimers stated that, “these people there see us here [at the dump]. They just take us for granted. Even if you have a serious problem they don’t listen. They say you are just people from the dumpsite. You are just scrap”.<sup>95</sup> Council officials do not recognize the reclaimers as a legitimate constituency in the waste management system and, when asked whether there should be consultative processes and empowerment programmes put in place for them to actively participate, the Manager, Health and Cleansing Services responded that, “they are residents of the municipality. So they can’t be given any extra rights. It is up to them to make sure they take advantage of the opportunities available to residents”.<sup>96</sup>

Members of Ikageng believe that an official who told them they could apply to get the contract if they formed a group, “was just saying that. He never thought the elders could register a business”.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, forming the closed corporations has made little difference. At first both Council officials and the director from Phutang refused to acknowledge that the reclaimers have formed closed corporations. When they did admit to this they did not grant it any relevance, and the Manager, Health and Cleansing referred to them as, “so-called ccs”.<sup>98</sup> The Assistant Manager, Health and Cleansing Services made clear his disdain for the reclaimers and their companies stating, “we wouldn’t give the contract to those companies as they were working against the municipality and Phutang. They were threatening us and throwing stones. They want to make it uncontrollable as they think then they will get the contract.”<sup>99</sup> Whilst it is true that the reclaimers have engaged in disruptive and at times aggressive behaviour, once they were denied any opportunity to participate in formal processes they had little option but to resort to direct action. It is therefore quite ironic that management then seems to consider such behaviour a natural attribute of reclaimers.

In addition to being cast as unruly, the reclaimers are depicted as uneducated and unskilled, characteristics which are deemed to render them ineligible to win the contract. Simon Mbata,

<sup>93</sup> Interview with women paper reclaimers, September 3, 2008.

<sup>94</sup> Focus group with Ditamating Committee, September 2, 2008.

<sup>95</sup> Focus group with Ditamating Committee, September 2, 2008.

<sup>96</sup> Interview, Lusizi Thile, September 5, 2008. It should be noted that the member of the mayoral committee responsible for waste acknowledged that it was a problem that council does not take the reclaimers seriously. When questioned as to whether it would be useful to have a landfill management committee he said that this would be a good idea and he would work on it. He also raised concerns about the nature of the relationship between the officials and the reclaimers. However, in the nine months since assumed his post he had not been to the landfill and had not met with the reclaimers, about whom he knew very little (Interview with Khulu Mthimkulu, September 3, 2008). He is, nevertheless, a potential transformative force in the council.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with women paper reclaimers, September 3, 2008.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Lusizi Thile, September 5, 2008.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Johann Labuschagne, September 3, 2008.



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the leader of Ditamating, describes the surprise of the directors of Phutang when in their first formal meeting he challenged them in fluent and articulate English. According to Mbata, “they didn’t think there were educated people here. But then they realised I was educated when they heard me speak. They always use English in their meetings. We did query them about that. They say it is an official language”. Mbata believes that Phutang purposefully uses English in order to reinforce power differentials with the reclaimers, many of whom are not as proficient in this language as Mbata. He states that whilst the directors of Phutang now treat him with more respect due to his language skills they continue to be dismissive of the other reclaimers, whom they assume are uneducated.

Perhaps most tellingly, the Council officials and Sasol representative are all clear that the reclaimers do not have the skills or capacity to run recycling operations on the dump. In addition to their lack of business skills it was also noted that they do not have any machines or equipment required to run the business.<sup>100</sup> The reclaimers report that this was put to them bluntly by one councillor who said, “you are talking a deal of millions of rands, but you don’t even have a car. What do you expect us to do?”<sup>101</sup> The tremendous irony in this situation is that the reclaimers have a proven track record of managing themselves and negotiating the sale of their goods with formal enterprises. Their plans for the dump are based on this experience. As Mbata explains, “we know what happened before so we worked on the base of that to develop the proposal and business plan”. Aware of their limitations they attended a workshop run by an NGO to help them develop a business plan, and also intended to hire a manager to help them run their operations.<sup>102</sup> By contrast, the Directors of Phutang had no background in recycling, no experience in business, and no access to capital or equipment before they received support from Sasol/Rejuvenation. Even with the assistance of the advisor provided by Sasol/Rejuvenation they have proven themselves utterly incapable of running the business. However, they are professionals who are well respected in the community, and key players in Sasol/Rejuvenation and Council obviously cannot see past the rubbish when they look at reclaimers.

### Conclusion – Waste opportunities

The situation in the Sasolburg case is not unique. Municipalities across South Africa are seeing the waste on their landfills as gold mines which can help them to generate income. Like Sasolburg they are selling the right to recycle materials from landfills to private companies. The Sasolburg case raises a host of issues which need to be considered by other municipalities who have adopted or are considering adopting this model. It shows that such approaches not only create pressures that reduce the income of reclaimers, but also trap reclaimers in informal employment and limit their possibilities to expand and formalize. The case also raises key questions about citizenship and democracy in post-apartheid South Africa. Despite constitutional and legislative commitments to “developmental local government” and participatory processes at local level, discrimination and prejudice against reclaimers meant that they were not treated as legitimate stakeholders in the waste management system, even

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Johann Labuschagne, September 3, 2008; Interview with Lusizi Thile, September 5, 2008; Interview with Zimbini Zwane, September 10, 2008.

<sup>101</sup> Focus Group with Ditamating Committee, September 2, 2008.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with metal reclaimer, September 3, 2008.



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though their livelihood depends on their labouring on the dump. Indeed, without the labour that the reclaimers perform the owners of Remade-Phutang would not be able to operate or generate profit for themselves. The reclaimers on the Sasolburg dump are exceptionally well organized. The municipality's failure to engage with them and develop a more inclusive approach to salvaging and recycling is truly a wasted opportunity.



# Chapter 4

## Making Space: Inclusion and Support for Reclaimers in Emfuleni

### Introduction

Emfuleni local municipality makes up the core of South Africa's "Vaal Triangle", which is the heart of the country's iron and steel industry. It includes Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark, Evaton, Sebokeng, Sharpeville, Boipatong, Bophelong and Tshepiso. Emfuleni is part of the Sedibeng District Municipality in South Africa's Gauteng Province (Emfuleni Local Municipality 2007, 13)

Emfuleni is struggling to address a history of poor waste management. There is a significant amount of illegal dumping in the municipality and none of the landfills has a permit (Emfuleni Local Municipality 2007, 47-48). However, as Emfuleni is moving forward with the permitting process it is seeking to formalize the status of reclaimers on the landfills. It is also taking a number of other initiatives to assist reclaimers working in the streets and communities of Emfuleni. This chapter explores Emfuleni's attempts to recognize and support reclaimers in the municipality. It highlights positive aspects of these interventions and also identifies ways in which they could be strengthened.

Initial research was conducted on May 26, 2008 as part of the groundWork report research team. Further fieldwork focused specifically on reclaimers and recycling initiatives was conducted from September 8-11 and on October 6, 2008. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with municipal officials, representatives of small and large recycling companies and purchasers of recyclable materials, a former councillor involved in recycling initiatives, a representative of a community recycling project, and representatives of reclaimer organizations based at two of the landfills. Ten short interviews were conducted with reclaimers working in the streets of Emfuleni and two focus groups were conducted with reclaimers working at the landfills.

### Emfuleni's Waste Management System

In 2001 an estimated 658,422 people lived in Emfuleni (Emfuleni Local Municipality 2007, 14). Of those who were employed 41.5% were in the manufacturing sector and 27.7% were in the services sector (Emfuleni Local Municipality 2007, 21). However, Emfuleni has been hard-hit by retrenchments and layoffs. At 54.1% in 2003 the unemployment rate in Emfuleni was the highest in Gauteng and higher than the national average (Emfuleni Local Municipality 2007, 22).





The waste management system in Emfuleni is highly inadequate. Only 46% of households receive weekly refuse collection services and an estimated 100,000 cubic metres of general waste mixed with soil is strewn across previously disadvantaged areas of the municipality (Emfuleni Local Municipality 2007, 46, 48). Emfuleni has three operational dumps. None have permits. The Boitshepi and Waldrift Landfills are currently managed by EnviroFill. The council is applying for permits to close both of these sites. It is also applying for a permit for the Palm Springs Landfill. As the municipal demarcation board allocated the farm that the Palm Springs landfill is located on to Johannesburg the Emfuleni municipality is negotiating a cross-border agreement with Johannesburg to develop the landfill (Emfuleni Local Municipality 2007, 47-8).

Emfuleni's Integrated Development Plan (IDP) mentions three recycling initiatives – plans to regulate and control recycling at the Boitshepi Landfill once a fence is erected; a recycling centre in Evaton West that has created nine jobs, and a Rotary Club Initiative in Vanderbijlpark which the IDP says has registered 150 reclaimers working in the streets, 60 of whom have been provided with trolleys (Emfuleni Local Municipality 2007, 48). Whilst this incorporation of recycling into the IDP is welcome it is incomplete. The 2007/2008 IDP incorrectly states that, “[o]nly Boitshepi site have [sic] 170 reclaimers that are currently working on the site on an informal basis” (Emfuleni Local Municipality 2007, 48). In fact, according to Oupa Loate, Superintendent Landfill Management for the Emfuleni Municipality there are 500 reclaimers at Boitshepi, 200 reclaimers at Palm Springs, and 40 at Waldrift.<sup>103</sup> It is unclear why the IDP makes no mention either of the existence of reclaimers at the other sites, or of the innovative efforts to formalize their presence. As Benjamin notes, the IDP does not include any meaningful examination of either the problems related to reclaiming on the landfills or the contributions that reclaimers can and are making to the waste management system (Benjamin 2007, 52-3). It also contains no reference to several other initiatives in place to support reclaimers in the municipality. Each of these is briefly discussed in the following sections.

### Community Recycling Centres

Emfuleni currently has two initiatives to provide support to community recycling centres. Both are partnerships between the municipality, the community and private companies. The first community recycling centre is located in Evaton. According to the 2008-2009 *Draft IDP Review* nine permanent jobs have been created (Emfuleni Local Municipality 2008, 58). The project was initiated in 2001-2002 when the waste management department secured the use of an unused building where community members could store recyclable materials before transporting them for sale to buy-back centres. Although funding dried up and the project largely collapsed some people continued to recycle on their own. The municipality has now partnered with “Buyisa-e-bag” which was set up by national government to promote waste minimization. Buyisa-e-bag has provided funding to purchase bailing machines and scales so that the site can be upgraded to become a buyback centre.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Alma Ludidi and Oupa Loate, September 6, 2008.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Alma Ludidi and Oupa Loate, September 6, 2008.



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The second initiative was launched in April 2008 as a partnership with the Dream Africa Trust Company and the community of Bhopelong. Dream Africa Trust was initially involved in reviving a shopping centre in Bhopelong. However, it was concerned about the amount of illegal dumping in the vicinity and the effect this would have on the retailers. As a result it approached the Emfuleni waste management department with the proposal to establish two mini-recycling centres. The three ward councillors in the area were each asked to identify four people who are paid stipends to run the centres.<sup>105</sup>

In addition the municipality is planning to establish a number of new mini recycling centres in Evaton West and Bhopelong with support from its twin city of Eindhoven in the Netherlands. The intention is to get community members to form cooperatives which will be responsible for running the centres themselves. These initiatives will be coordinated through the ward councillors.<sup>106</sup> Whilst this is one way of creating channels between the municipality and residents it also opens up the possibility that political patronage will be used in determining who has access to, and can benefit from the project.

### **Improving conditions for street reclaimers**

In 2004 Emfuleni launched a programme aimed at supporting reclaimers working in the streets of upmarket suburbs in Vanderbijlpark. Although the initiative is mentioned in successive IDPs it was initiated, funded and managed largely by the Rotary Club of Riverside.

The project was the brainchild of Maureen Dosoudil. She explains that initially she did not have a particular interest in either waste or the plight of reclaimers. However, as the chairperson of the community policing forum she received regular complaints that crime increased on waste collection days. Residents were convinced that reclaimers were to blame. Not believing that all reclaimers were committing crimes Dosoudil wanted to find a way to separate those who were from those who were earning an honest living by extracting recyclable materials from people's bins.<sup>107</sup>

Dosoudil held a series of meetings with residents, reclaimers and management at the buyback centres where the reclaimers sell their materials. She discovered that reclaimers are true entrepreneurs. As she explained:

Anybody that gets up at four in the morning in the middle of winter in the darkness and walks 13 km to earn enough to buy food to put on his table must be a true entrepreneur, his limitations only being lack of management skills and hope. You see, he himself, as an entrepreneur, must build on what he has. Because of his lack of education and skills he can't go further. But with training and support he can.<sup>108</sup>

She also became convinced that because of levels of poverty and unemployment it would be impossible to try to stop people from picking through waste. The solution would be to

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Alma Ludidi and Oupa Loate, September 6, 2008.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Alma Ludidi and Oupa Loate, September 6, 2008.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Maureen Dosoudil, September 9, 2008.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Maureen Dosoudil, September 9, 2008.



develop a method of work that would be safer, cleaner and more dignified for the reclaimers, and would also keep the neighbourhoods tidy and help the residents to understand that the reclaimers are not criminals. In meetings community members said that they would be willing to support reclaimers if they could develop an ongoing relationship with a regular and identifiable group of people. After meeting with the police Dosoudil decided that the way forward would be to give the reclaimers proper identification. The reclaimers were pleased with this as they felt that it would also provide them with protection.<sup>109</sup>

Dosoudil is an active woman. In addition to being the chairperson of the community policing forum she was then the president of the Rotary Club of Riverside and a councillor for the Democratic Alliance. She sold the idea of the project to the Rotary Club which spent R150,000 to provide all of the reclaimers with identity cards and dustcoats and to purchase sixty trolleys which could be used by the reclaimers. The dustcoats were bright yellow and had “registered recycler” emblazoned across the back so that the reclaimers would be easily recognizable. Dosoudil met with the municipal manager, the member of the mayoral committee responsible for waste and officials from the waste management department to secure municipal endorsement for the project. Through the radio, newspapers and a door-to-door campaign, residents were requested to put their recyclable materials out in a separate blue bag on collection day to be collected by registered reclaimers. Reclaimers were given flyers to give to residents which stated the name of the reclaimer and explained that s/he was responsible for collecting recyclables from their street.<sup>110</sup>

At its peak 300 reclaimers were involved in the initiative. Each reclaimer was registered at a buyback centre. The main purpose of the registration was to ensure that records could be kept on the reclaimers. Dosoudil relied on the buyback centres as she did not believe that this was a function that Council either could or should perform. She also thought that registration with buyback centres would help the centres to plan ahead - as they would know how many reclaimers would be selling to them each month they would be prepared for the amount of materials that would arrive and would be able to sort and sell them without having to stockpile them for long periods. Dosoudil added that an additional advantage of having the reclaimers register at buyback centers was that management could identify reclaimers with potential and help them to advance into other positions in the industry. However, what the registration meant was that the reclaimers were tied to particular buyers and did not have the freedom to try to negotiate better prices from different dealers. It was a highly paternalistic way of regularizing and controlling the activities of reclaimers.<sup>111</sup>

Dosoudil held monthly meetings at the buy-back centres with the participating reclaimers to discuss their problems and find solutions. In winter the trolleys were cold and so they requested that they be given gloves. In summer the dustcoats were too warm and as a result they were provided with t-shirts. Prizes were awarded for the reclaimer who collected the most material and who was at work most frequently in order to motivate the participants. There was a great deal of support for the project from residents. They not only separated out recyclable materials but also began to leave out other items such as clothing and household

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Maureen Dosoudil, September 9, 2008.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Maureen Dosoudil, September 9, 2008.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Maureen Dosoudil, September 9, 2008.



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items for the reclaimers. Dosoudil claims that the project led to a dramatic increase in earnings for the reclaimers from R5 to R50 per day.<sup>112</sup> Whilst it is hard to imagine that the average income was previously so low the assertion that earnings increased is credible.

However, the project ran into a number of problems. The reclaimers did not always wear the dustcoats. As this was the way that the community identified them this led to unhappiness amongst the residents. Some community members resented having to pay for the blue bags. Initially they cost R4 each. Even when the Rotary Club started providing them to reclaimers to sell for R0.50 community members were reluctant to incur an additional cost and stopped separating out the recyclables. But according to Dosoudil the main problems lay with council itself. Despite the inclusion of the project in the IDP she feels that Council did not provide sufficient support to the initiative.<sup>113</sup> Although the waste management department provided training for the reclaimers on health and safety and identifying differing types and grades of recyclables, it did not conduct any education for its own staff regarding the project.<sup>114</sup> Some municipal workers would load the blue bags onto the refuse trucks, which infuriated and demotivated residents who had taken the time to separate out recyclables for the reclaimers.<sup>115</sup> Ludidi, Manager Waste and Landfill Site Management for the Emfuleni waste management department also noted that the programme was launched during a difficult time for the council when it neither had funds to allocate to the project nor even trucks that could be used to assist the reclaimers in transporting their materials to buyback centres.<sup>116</sup>

Dosoudil thought that perhaps Council wasn't giving sufficient attention to the project as they saw it as a DA initiative. When her term as a councillor was over she quit the DA and joined the ANC in the hopes that this would bolster support for the project. She argued that it was the ideal way to fulfil the ANC election slogan of "building better communities" and to promote employment creation. She also argued that it was an excellent way to bridge divides based on race and class by creating an initiative in which impoverished black reclaimers and wealthy, primarily white suburban residents could engage and relate to one another. However, Dosoudil says that the ANC has not embraced the project and has preferred to launch recycling initiatives that are based in the townships where potential reclaimers live. She feels that this is misguided as residents in wealthier suburbs generate larger volumes of high quality recyclable materials.<sup>117</sup>

The project was re-launched in October 2004 and then again in February 2005. Although it still exists in name and in the IDP it is not fully functional. Dosoudil has a number of ideas regarding how to make the project successful and sustainable. A primary concern is that there should be a way to allocate specific streets to individual reclaimers. This would provide the reclaimers with secure income and help to assuage the fears of residents by ensuring that they could develop an ongoing relationship with the reclaimer/s who worked on their street. It would also prevent wealthier people with cars and bakkies from driving around and

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Maureen Dosoudil, September 9, 2008.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Maureen Dosoudil, September 9, 2008.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Alma Ludidi and Oupa Loate, October 6, 2008.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with Maureen Dosoudil, September 9, 2008.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with Alma Ludidi and Oupa Loate, October 6, 2008.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with Maureen Dosoudil, September 9, 2008.



collecting all the recyclables before they can be retrieved by reclaimers. Dosoudil's solution is to register each reclaimer as a street trader with a licence that would grant him/her exclusive right to trade in certain streets. Enforcing this arrangement would require the passage of new bylaws.<sup>118</sup> However, although the IDP notes that the main problem encountered by the project is that there is no legislation to support this type of venture (Emfuleni Local Municipality 2007, 48), waste management officials are insistent that they cannot pass special bylaws to facilitate the project, and that in any event the municipality cannot allocate streets to specific reclaimers as this would exclude others.<sup>119</sup>

Although this initiative has not been a sustained success it demonstrates that it is possible to build partnerships between reclaimers, communities, buyback centres, Council and community and business organizations. Dosoudil played a critically important role in ensuring that the project achieved the success that it did. At the same time, the project was strongly influenced by her analysis of the problems and her personal vision, which were rooted in a pro-business, individually oriented model. The fact that it was initiated outside of Council and was bound up in party politics also potentially influenced the project's viability. Perhaps if the Council played a stronger role in facilitating inclusive planning processes then more innovative, transformative and sustainable approaches could be developed for future separation at source initiatives that involve and empower reclaimers.

### **Bringing Reclaimers to the Market**

Lack of transport to take their goods to buyback centres is a key problem for reclaimers. Without access to vehicles they are either limited by what they can physically carry or must forfeit a significant percentage of their earnings to pay someone with a bakkie to help them take their goods to market. The Emfuleni waste management department therefore identified that it could enhance the livelihood of reclaimers by providing them with cheap, reliable transportation.

In 2005 and then again in 2006 the municipality won the Gauteng province's Bontle-ke-botho clean and green competition. It used the prize money to purchase a truck that provides reclaimers with transport. The first truck was launched in April 2007 and a second one was brought on stream in October 2008. Oupa Loate, who is the Superintendent for Landfills, is in charge of the programme. Community members involved in reclaiming register with Loate to participate. When they wish to sell their materials they contact Loate who deploys a driver to transport the reclaimers and their materials to the buyback centre of their choice. The municipality charges R5 for a regular sized load.<sup>120</sup> Reclaimers who are making use of this service state that it has made a tremendous difference to their earnings as previously they were paying up to R80 for transport. However, as the municipality only has two trucks they are not always available. Reclaimers must then either wait or pay for private transport.<sup>121</sup> Alma Ludidi, Manager of Waste and Landfill Site Management, estimates that the department needs five more trucks dedicated to this service if it is going to meet the need in the community.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Interview with Maureen Dosoudil, September 9, 2008.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Alma Ludid and Oupa Loate, October 10, 2008.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with Alma Ludid and Oupa Loate, October 10, 2008.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Thembekil Dlamini, September 11, 2008; Interview with Johnny Mothibeli, September 8, 2008.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Alma Ludidi and Oupa Loate, October 6, 2008.



## Chapter 4: Making Space

In order to further assist the reclaimers Loate has taken it upon himself to research the hierarchies of the recycling industry and negotiate with buyback centres and producers to try to limit price fluctuations and improve the rates paid to reclaimers. Loate has also been meeting with ward councillors to encourage them to support reclaimers.<sup>123</sup> A number of ward committees are actively involved in recycling initiatives. For example, in ward 37 in Sebokeng community member Thembekil Dlamini coordinates the Motswako Community Recycling Project as part of the ward environmental committee. Twenty-seven, predominantly female residents are members of Motswako, which recently registered as a closed corporation “so that we can benefit if there are any opportunities”. Motswako members collect recyclable materials from open spaces and use the transport provided by Loate to sell their materials. Whilst this support is appreciated what Motswako members most need is a space where they can sort and store their materials.<sup>124</sup> Unfortunately the waste management department cannot assist in securing such sites. According to Loate it is ward councillors who have the political powers to negotiate with the municipality to provide the sites, have them fenced and get them permitted by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry as transfer stations.<sup>125</sup>

### Formalizing Reclaiming on the Landfills

Perhaps the most ambitious initiative of the Emfuleni waste management department is the effort to regularize reclaiming on the landfills. When Oupa Loate was hired as the Superintendent for Landfills in 2006 there was unregulated reclaiming on all of the dumps. According to Loate the municipality made clear in his interview that the successful candidate would need to address this situation. Although the municipality wanted to simply get rid of the reclaimers, from his experience managing other landfills Loate was aware that this was neither possible nor necessary. Loate notes that although the minimum requirements discourage reclaiming:

[y]ou can have wastepickers if you have a good management system in place. Then you are entitled to have them... The minimum requirements say there should be no one on site and you can take that as is. But if you see that 90% of the waste being dumped here is recyclable then you can say there is something we can do - we can have people here, we can have a buyback centre and do something.<sup>126</sup>

Loate has rich experience in the waste management sector. After leaving the military he began to work for Wastetech in 1995. He explains how his experience working as a gate clerk sensitized him to issues related to reclaiming:

At Wastetech I started as a gate clerk recording waste coming on site manually. There was no weighbridge. As time goes on you educate yourself and it just came to me you can't chase the people away. When I got myself involved with the people then they said they are not working and this is the only way they can earn some money. And I

<sup>123</sup> Interview with Alma Ludidi and Oupa Loate, October 6, 2008.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with Thembekil Dlamini, September 11, 2008.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with Alma Ludidi and Oupa Loate, October 6, 2008.

<sup>126</sup> Interview with Oupa Loate, October 6, 2008.



realized that we can change something - instead of hiring security with shotguns we can negotiate with these people.<sup>127</sup>

This is precisely what he did when he was appointed by EnviroFill to manage a landfill in Mogale City. When Loate arrived the site was not permitted and there were 650 reclaimers working and living on the dump. The municipality wanted to prohibit reclaiming. Instead Loate helped to arrange alternative accommodation for them and developed a system that would allow them to continue reclaiming in an orderly and safe fashion. He successfully applied for a permit for the landfill that made provision for reclaiming. Loate is now attempting to implement the same method in Emfuleni.

Unlike his counterparts in other municipalities who dismiss the possibility of brokering agreements with reclaimers Loate observes that, “[w]hen you start negotiating with people they are very intelligent. What you need to do is to talk to people and to convince the people”.<sup>128</sup> Rather than simply tolerating the presence of reclaimers he sees it as his role to proactively support and encourage them. As Loate observes, the key is, “how you approach the people and what you bring to their minds, what motivational thoughts you can give to make them encouraged to be there day in and day out. You must let them know the important role that they play in terms of the environment. You must make them feel better”.<sup>129</sup> Loate has an advanced certificate in labour relations and as a good manager he knows that a motivated and committed workforce of reclaimers will help to ensure smooth functioning of the systems at the landfill. But his drive to boost the confidence of the reclaimers is also linked to his passionate commitment to uplifting their conditions and his sincere belief in the contribution that they make to the waste management system. In interviews he repeatedly refers to his pride in the work that they do and the role that they play in saving airspace at the landfill.

Loate’s approach is to work closely and respectfully with the reclaimers:

The first thing, you introduce yourself to the people and you have to explain what the changes are going to be about, and you have to put that in practice. You must be with them from day one until the success of the project. You have to have meetings with them from time to time. I also have the idea of appointing the committee to deal with the issues to solve the problems amongst themselves.<sup>130</sup>

There are a number of core elements to the model that Loate developed in Mogale City and is implementing in Emfuleni. First, Loate requires each reclaimer to register and issues him or her with an identity card. No children are allowed to register. Although some sneak onto the sites officially they are not allowed to work there. Whilst the purpose of these cards is to register the reclaimers on the site, as in other countries reclaimers have managed to use these cards to secure credit at retail stores. Loate does not require the reclaimers to have South African identity books, which is important as a large number of foreign reclaimers work on

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Oupa Loate, October 6, 2008.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Oupa Loate, October 6, 2008.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Oupa Loate, October 6, 2008.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Oupa Loate, October 6, 2008.



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the landfills. However, he has arranged for the Department of Home Affairs to come to the landfill to issue identity books to those who qualify. This then enables them to apply for social grants.

Second, Loate organizes the reclaimers into groups according to gender and age, with one group each for young women, young men, older women and older men. These groups have rotating rights to the trucks that enter the landfill. This prevents the mad scramble for materials that occurs on unregulated landfills. As each group has equal access to the materials the young men can't muscle out the women and the older men.

Third, Loate creates a sorting and storage space away from the working face for each reclaimer. At Palm Springs Landfill he demarcates these areas with mounds of earth. The reclaimers are required to keep the areas clean and tidy. This achieves the multiple purposes of maintaining an orderly environment, providing the reclaimers with safe working spaces and preventing disputes between reclaimers over who collected which material.

Fourth, Loate has established a burial society to provide the reclaimers with additional social protection. Initially the society at Palm Springs required a monthly contribution of R5 and most reclaimers were participating. However, Loate decided to increase the contribution to R50 so that the society could also cover costs for the burial of family members. Since then most reclaimers have stopped contributing. The fund is administered by Loate. He keeps the money in his office in order to avoid banking fees, but provides the reclaimers with monthly reports and brings the money to the meetings so that they can confirm how much is available.

Fifth, each of the four reclaimer groups is requested to elect two members onto a steering committee. The committee does not have a constitution, is not formally registered and does not have a name. The role of the committee is to ensure that all reclaimers abide by the rules and that there is discipline and order on the landfill. If a problem arises with an individual reclaimer it will initially be dealt with by the steering committee. However, if it cannot be resolved then it is taken to Loate for final decision making. Loate's decision is final and cannot be appealed. Typically punishments involve being banned from the site for periods ranging between a day and several weeks, depending on the severity of the transgression.<sup>131</sup>

Loate has attempted to implement this system at both Palm Springs and Boitshepe. However, whilst Palm Springs is a model exemplar, chaos reigns at Boitshepe. This is partially due to the larger number of reclaimers at Boitshepe. However, the key difference is likely the fact that whilst Loate is the hands-on manager at Palm Springs, day-to-day management of Boitshepe has been outsourced to EnviroFill. As a result Loate has less direct engagement with the reclaimers.

Members of the steering committee interviewed at Boitshepe indicated that the system was largely not functioning. There was a great deal of competition between reclaimers for access to materials and a tremendous amount of tension between South African and foreign reclaimers.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Oupa Loate, October 6, 2008.





It would appear that non-South Africans were excluded from the committee, as committee members repeatedly raised problems with “foreigners” as a key issue to be addressed.<sup>132</sup>

By contrast, the model was working well at Palm Springs. Committee members indicated that since they were divided into groups, rules for working were developed and the steering committee was established it is easier to work, there is less conflict and incomes have increased. Steering Committee members indicated that they do not mind that Loate attends their meetings as he provides them with guidance. They also think that it is useful that he acts as final decision maker as he is respected by all of the reclaimers, is seen as impartial and has the authority that they feel they lack to enforce decisions.<sup>133</sup>

Although the reclaimers at Palm Springs are not paid by the municipality, Loate (whom reclaimers affectionately refer to as a “father” and a “helper”) is effectively their supervisor. He developed the team approach, designed the rules that govern the landfill and has final say in disciplinary matters. He has gathered extensive information on the recycling hierarchy which he has used successfully to negotiate improvements in the earnings of the reclaimers. However, he has done this on his own initiative and has not involved them in this process. When interviewed the steering committee members said that they did not know who the major producers are, or the prices being offered by different purchasers of recyclable materials.<sup>134</sup> The committee’s only function is to ensure that reclaimers abide by the rules of the landfill. In reality it is more like the employee work teams popular within post-fordist production methods whose purpose is to facilitate production rather than to empower workers to truly take control of the production process.

In terms of the Labour Relations Amendment Act of 2002 (Republic of South Africa 2002) there are seven criteria, any of which qualify someone as an employee, regardless of whether s/he is referred to as an independent contractor or has a formal contract with the employer. One of these criteria is that the person’s work is controlled or directed. On this basis it could be possible to argue that the reclaimers are actually municipal employees. From interviews with reclaimers it is unclear whether they would prefer to be employed and paid by the municipality. What is clear, however, is that when moving forward with the regularization of reclaiming on the landfills, it will be important for the municipality and the reclaimers to think through the type of relationship that they are forging. In Brazil local municipalities have proactively worked with reclaimer cooperatives to help them to build their capacity to function independently, determine their own agendas and move up the recycling hierarchy, in some cases by becoming producers of products made from recyclable materials (Dias 2006, 2007). Whilst the active inclusion of the reclaimers in the running of the Palm Springs Landfill is laudable, there is much more that the municipality could do to facilitate the empowerment of democratic organizations controlled by the reclaimers themselves.

<sup>132</sup> Focus group with Boitshepe Reclaimer’s Committee, September 9, 2008.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with Palm Springs Steering Committee Members, October 6, 2008.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with Palm Springs Steering Committee Members, October 6, 2008.



### Conclusion – Moving beyond the benevolent patriarch

Emfuleni has undertaken a number of important initiatives to actively include reclaimers in the municipal waste management system and to improve their status and income. This has taken a tremendous amount of innovation and commitment on the part of waste management officials. This case demonstrates that it is possible to develop sustainable waste management models that enhance, as opposed to undermine, the position of reclaimers. Key to this approach has been the belief that reclaimers are legitimate stakeholders in the waste management system with whom municipalities can develop good working relations.

Whilst there is much to laud in Emfuleni's approach, to date the reclaimers have only been granted a circumscribed role within the process of developing and managing the recycling initiatives. The city acts as a benevolent patriarch, taking decisions and managing processes on behalf of the reclaimers. The challenge that lies ahead is for the municipality, the reclaimers, and organizations in civil society to develop approaches that create even more space for reclaimers to envision their own dreams, determine their own agenda and manage their own processes.



# Chapter 5

## Reclaiming in Three Municipalities – Some Key Issues

Taken together the three case studies raise a number of important issues related to the role of reclaimers in municipal waste management systems and how they are being affected by current processes to formalize recycling. This chapter outlines some of these issues as a basis for the development of recommendations presented in chapter six.

### **Contributions to sustainability**

Reclaimers make important contributions to environmental sustainability. By diverting waste from landfills they save airspace, extend the life of the landfill and minimize the need to acquire new land for landfills. They provide the raw materials required for recycling processes and reduce the amount of raw materials required for production.

### **Reclaiming livelihoods**

In the context of high and increasing unemployment people are taking the initiative to sustain themselves by reclaiming materials from the municipal waste stream. Reclaimers consume salvaged materials in their own homes, vend materials for re-use in the informal economy and sell recyclable materials to middlemen who supply them as inputs to producers in the formal economy. As reclaiming allows people to sustain themselves by re-inserting reclaimed commodities into circuits of reproduction, exchange and production in both the formal and informal economies it represents a diverse livelihood strategy for people with few prospects of securing wage labour.

### **Enclosure and formalization of recycling – destroying livelihoods**

The enclosure of landfills and formalization of recycling initiatives can have devastating effects on reclaimers' livelihoods if reclaimers are not taken into consideration when these processes are designed. In Msunduzi the municipality took a formal decision to evict the reclaimers from the New England Road landfill. Although the reclaimers managed to access the landfill for short periods each day with the tacit agreement of the municipal officials their working hours were dramatically reduced and they were unable to store their reclaimed materials on site. Without the prospect of securing other employment this has left the reclaimers struggling to sustain themselves. In Metsimaholo the reclaimers are allowed to remain on the site, but only if they sell their materials to the company that has been granted the exclusive right to reclaim materials from the Sasolburg landfill. As reclaimers previously sold their materials



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directly to middlemen and producers this has had a negative effect on their income. In both of these instances the enclosure and privatization of waste on the landfill has dispossessed reclaimers and compromised their ability to support themselves and their families.

### **Breaking bridges – confining reclaimers to the informal economy**

Since 2003 the ANC government has argued that South Africa is characterised by two economies. It is asserted that:

‘two economies’ persist in one country. The first is an advanced, sophisticated economy, based on skilled labour, which is becoming more globally competitive. The second is a mainly informal, marginalised, unskilled economy, populated by the unemployed and those unemployable in the formal sector (ANC 2004).

As the two economies are seen to be separated by a structural divide it is forwarded that government has a key role to play in building bridges to help people move out of the second and into the first economy.

A number of scholars have established that, contrary to the two economies theory, the so-called second and first economies are intimately related by backward and forward linkages of commodities and labour (see the articles in Bond 2007). The case studies reaffirm this position as reclaimers provide inputs required for production in the formal economy. Reclaimers in Metsimaholo were also actively negotiating with buyers in the formal economy and transforming and improving the terms on which they related to the formal economy. Ironically, rather than helping reclaimers to move into the formal economy the approaches adopted in the three municipalities actively confine reclaimers to informality by limiting their role to reclaiming materials from the waste stream and selling them to buyback centres.

### **Prejudice and discrimination against reclaimers**

Reclaimers in Metsimaholo were subject to intense discrimination. Referred to as scavengers they were disregarded and felt that they were treated like the garbage that they work with. This resonates with research from a range of international contexts that shows that reclaimers are frequently reviled, stigmatized, ostracized, and treated as expendable as they become associated with the detritus that they rummage through (International Labour Organisation 2004; Medina undated; Benjamin 2007; Beall 1997; Chikarmane and Narayan 2005; Huysman 1994; Tejani April 2003; Rogers 2005). Whilst such attitudes were less overtly articulated by officials in Msunduzi, reclaimers reported being called derogatory names and feeling discriminated against. By contrast, in Emfuleni waste management officials stressed the importance of referring to reclaimers as either reclaimers or recyclers and of engaging with them respectfully. This difference in attitude is reflected in the more open and inclusive policies of the Emfuleni municipality. A key step in creating more progressive policy will be working to change the attitudes of municipal officials towards reclaimers.



### **Black economic empowerment**

In Metsimaholo black economic empowerment was used as a justification for granting the contract to a company that had no experience in the recycling industry or business more generally and no access to capital or equipment. Whilst it is true that the directors come from previously disadvantaged backgrounds they are both professionals with full time employment. By contrast, the reclaimers have years of experience in running reclaiming operations on the landfill and negotiating with large companies to sell their materials. In line with the concept of broad based black economic empowerment in which empowerment is meant to benefit the most marginalized it would have been far more appropriate to provide the financial and mentoring support made available to Phutang to the reclaimers who have relevant experience, actually perform the labour of reclamation on the site, and are wholly dependent on the landfill for their livelihood.

### **Failure to see reclaimers as a constituency and to consult them**

Neither Metsimaholo nor Msunduzi has established structures or processes to engage, consult or negotiate with the reclaimers. Sticking to the narrowest interpretation of the Minimum Standards they consider the reclaimers to be illegal and illegitimate and refuse to have any formal relationship with them. By contrast, the officials in Emfuleni understand that they cannot simply wish or force the reclaimers away and that they need to engage with them. The Superintendent for Landfills therefore got the reclaimers to form committees which he can meet with and work through. Similarly the coordinator of the Rotary Club initiative held regular meetings with the reclaimers involved in the project. This recognition that reclaimers have a stake in the waste management system and have a right to be actively involved is a marked improvement on the situation in the other two municipalities. However, these processes are quite narrowly framed. Although reclaimers are consulted final decision making and authority rests with municipal officials/Rotary Club representatives. There is a need to develop approaches in which reclaimers are treated as equal partners in the development of municipal recycling initiatives.

### **Security is not the solution – the need to engage with reclaimers**

Msunduzi and Metsimaholo have both spent significant amounts of money on fences and security guards to try to control reclaimers by force. But holes can be cut in fences, and security can be evaded, confronted and even befriended. As people are driven to reclaim by poverty and lack of employment opportunities Msunduzi has found that it is actually impossible to completely stop reclaiming on landfills. However, as the municipality refuses to officially accommodate the reclaimers it has developed an informal policy of turning a blind eye when reclaimers sneak onto the site during off-peak hours. This has left the reclaimers in a highly precarious position, has significantly decreased their income, and means that the municipality cannot effectively regulate their activities when they are on site. The experience in Emfuleni shows that it is possible to engage respectfully with reclaimers and to negotiate enforceable and safe work procedures. It is notable that these systems work at the Palm Springs landfill in the absence of a fence or security presence. Negotiation, not force, is surely the answer.



### **Waste is a social issue**

Waste management has historically been seen as a technical issue and waste management departments are typically run by engineers. The case studies have shown that waste is a profoundly social issue. It is not sufficient for waste managers to say they will deal with social issues if people who are affected complain once something is already being implemented, as is the case with the separation at source initiative in Msunduzi. The social relations underpinning the production, collection, disposal and reclaiming of waste in the formal and informal economies have a profound influence on the viability and effect of recycling initiatives. It is imperative that municipalities start to see waste management as a matter of social policy and develop the capacity within waste management departments to identify and address social concerns. This includes the ability to work respectfully, consult and negotiate with reclaimers.

### **Divisions between reclaimers**

Divisions between reclaimers are apparent in all three municipalities. Young men tended to monopolize reclaiming of higher value scrap metal. In Msunduzi and Metsimaholo it was said that women chose not to collect scrap as it is too heavy. However, some women stated that they did not collect scrap as the young men intimidated them and muscled them out when they were scrabbling for materials. If the women did find valuable pieces of scrap they would hide them so that the young men would not steal them. This division of labour based on gender and age played an important role in leading young men from townships other than Sobantu to gather at a separate meeting place from the other reclaimers. In Metsimaholo it even manifested in the formation of separate organizations. In Emfuleni the Superintendent for landfills prevented these dynamics by dividing the reclaimers into groups for young men, young women, old men and old women and giving each rotating access to the trucks entering the dumps. Once they were provided with equal access women and older men collected all materials. Whilst this method broke down divisions of labour and created greater equity in access to materials, it was externally motivated and enforced. It will be crucially important that reclaimers grapple with finding ways to address these divisions and their underlying causes as they move forward in organizing initiatives.

### **Forms of organizing**

Different forms of reclaimer organizations are beginning to emerge in the three municipalities. In Emfuleni the municipality's Superintendent for Landfills has played the central role in determining the structure, composition and role of the committee for reclaimers. The committee's main function is to ensure discipline and order on the dump. It is more like a participatory management tool than a reclaimer-controlled organization through which reclaimers determine their own objectives and priorities.

In Msunduzi organizing has also been externally motivated, but in this instance by the environmental justice organization groundWork. groundWork is seeking to facilitate processes through which the reclaimers develop their own democratic organization. It convenes meetings of the reclaimers and invites them to workshops and exchanges through which they can deepen their understandings of issues that affect them and develop both their



demands and their capacity to achieve them. This process is only just beginning and requires a tremendous amount of time, resources and dedication. In the meantime, there is an urgent need for groundWork and the reclaimers to come up with strategies and tactics to help the reclaimers regain regularized access to the dump.

It is only in Metsimaholo that reclaimers have independently initiated their own organizations. This was spurred by the hope that if they could come together collectively and form closed corporations then they would be able to win the contract to control reclaiming on the dump. Due to divisions between the young men who reclaim scrap and the women and older men who reclaim other materials they have formed two separate closed corporations. These groups each have clear visions regarding how they would like to control and expand their work and transform their place within the recycling economy. As noted above, a key challenge for them will be to find ways to address their differences and work collaboratively to advance their struggles.

### **Box – Organizing reclaimers - Asmare in Belo Horizonte, Brazil and the KKPKP Union in Pune, India**

Reclaimers' organizations are much more advanced in other countries around the world. These organizations take many different forms, which are influenced by factors such as:

- the local and national policy context
- how reclaimers define themselves - for example whilst some see themselves as budding entrepreneurs others identify as workers
- the political orientation of the reclaimers – for example, whilst some simply want to move up the value chain others seek to transform the capitalist nature of the economy.

#### **Asmare**

The Asmare cooperative in Belo Horizonte, Brazil provides an interesting example of how reclaimers have organized and mobilized to advance their position within society and the economy. The information presented below on Asmare is drawn mainly from the work of Sonia Maria Dias (2000; 2006), a sociologist who was previously employed in the social mobilization department of the municipality's waste management department, personal communication with Fabiana Goulart of the NGO INSEA which works closely with Asmare, as well as visits to Belo Horizonte in March 2008 by Pat Horn (2008) and the author.

Asmare was formed in May 1990. The *Pastoral de Rua*, or street pastoral of the Catholic church, played an important role in catalyzing its formation. The *Pastoral* has a long history of working with homeless people in Brazil. In the late 1980s the *Pastoral* in Belo Horizonte noticed that many people living on the streets supported themselves by doing reclaiming work. In 1988 it began to work with reclaimers. It called reclaimers together through assemblies and street parties and the need to form an organization was identified. This



culminated in the formation of Asmare in 1990. Initially Asmare's key demands included the right to work in the city and collect recyclable materials, as well as a place to sort their material.

Asmare now has 287 associates. When associates join they receive training in the work of reclaiming if it is new to them, and also in how Asmare functions. Each associate must complete an application form and pay monthly dues of R\$3.00. This is equivalent to 20 kg of paper and is deducted from the payment that they receive for materials collected. The steering committee is elected every two years. It is made up of one representative from each of its seven committees. The committees are focused on Infrastructure, Health, Religion, Social Communication, Finances, Environment and Education/Culture/ Entertainment.

Over the years Asmare has negotiated important agreements with the city council and has developed innovative means to improve the status of reclaimers in both the economy and society. In 1993 the Workers' Party won control of the Belo Horizonte Council and initiated a number of activities to support reclaimers in the city. It signed an accord with Asmare stating that Asmare is the municipality's preferred partner for the implementation of recycling schemes. In terms of the accord the municipality provides Asmare with a monthly subsidy (equivalent to US\$30,000 in 2005) to help cover administrative expenses. In 1993 the municipality's Department of Public Cleansing (SLU) and Asmare implemented a separation at source waste management system. The SLU collects the separated waste. Refuse is sent to the landfill and recyclable materials are diverted to a warehouse provided to Asmare by the municipality where Asmare members sort and bale the recyclable materials and keep the profits from the sale. The municipality has also provided Asmare with a second warehouse where reclaimers working in the streets can store and sort their materials. Although each member is paid based on what s/he has collected, because they sell their materials collectively they get higher prices. In March 2007 Asmare joined with eight smaller cooperatives to open a plastics recycling factory. The factory purchases materials from the nine organizations and from independent reclaimers. The workers, who are all cooperative members, are paid slightly above the average factory wage. The factory is experiencing teething problems and is battling with private producers who are seeking to undermine it. However, it represents an important and innovative initiative by reclaimers to move up the production hierarchy and transform both the nature of the recycling industry and their place within it.

The municipality and Asmare have also employed a number of inventive strategies to improve the social status of reclaimers. In 1993 the SLU established a Social Mobilization Department. It is a multidisciplinary team that employs 29 sociologists, psychologists, education specialists, geographers, artists, architects and engineers, and 30 trainee students. In addition to providing support to reclaimer organizations this department does outreach to all sectors of society to create greater awareness of and support for recycling initiatives and to transform the way that people see and relate to reclaimers. For a number of years Asmare and the SLU ran a Carnival of reclaimers and SLU staff that became a landmark event on the Brazilian carnival calendar. Participants wore costumes made of recycled materials. The event received national media coverage and played an important role in showcasing the talents of people previously ignored and discriminated against by society.





A bar named *Reciclo 1* and a restaurant named *Reciclo 2* owned and run by Asmare also provide spaces where reclaimers can learn new skills and where members of the public can interact socially with reclaimers. *Reciclo 1* includes an internet café, sewing workshop and administrative centre. *Reciclo 2* has a meeting space which is rented out and houses the offices of both an NGO that works closely with Asmare and of the Minas Gerais State Waste and Citizenship Forum.

In recent years Asmare's work has been strengthened by developments at a national level. It is a member of the National Movement of Collectors of Recyclable Material (MNCR) which was formed in 2001 and now has members across the country. Waste and citizenship forums which bring together reclaimers, government and other relevant parties have been established at national, state and local levels to try to improve the status of reclaimers. Reclaiming has been recognized as an occupational category, and a number of pieces of legislation actively promote the position of reclaimers within sustainable waste management systems and the recycling economy (for further information please see Dias 2000, 2006; Horn 2008).

### **KKPKP Trade Union of Waste Pickers in Pune, India**

For more than fifteen years reclaimers in Pune, India have been organized into a wastepicker's union called Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP). Poornima Chikarmane and Laxmi Naraya (Ciharmane and Naraya 2005) who have been actively involved in the KKPKP describe the history, struggles and achievements of the KKPKP in a report called "Organising the Unorganised: A Case Study of the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (Trade Union of Waste-pickers)". The information presented below is summarized from this report.

Activist academics from the National Adult Education Programme of SNDT Women's University played a key role in kicking off the organizing process. In 1990 they began working with child wastepickers who collected scrap from bins. They successfully campaigned for residents in a wealthy neighbourhood to start separating their waste so that the girls could access it more easily. The girls' mothers were also wastepickers. They said that they would prefer to access the separated waste themselves and send their daughters to school. SNDT issued thirty women with identity cards and they began to collect the segregated waste. Their conditions of work and earnings improved and they could decrease the number of hours that they spent working.

After six months an entrepreneur with a vehicle began to collect refuse from households in the same area for a fee. The women protested that they had lost their livelihood. They lobbied the entrepreneur and the community and refused to let the bins be collected. The entrepreneur withdrew and the community continued to work with the women. But the women and SNDT were clear that they would face similar threats in the future if they did not organize. Dr Baba Adhav, President of the Hamal Panchayat (trade union of headloaders) helped them to realize the importance of organizing a critical mass of wastepickers.



Using the popular education methods of Paulo Freire SNTD activists began to work with the wastepickers to reflect on and analyse their situation and to identify the critical issues that they faced. At first they did not think of what they did as work, as they thought work was a secure job in a company or government. But then they realized that they had consciously chosen wastepicking over other jobs like construction work as it gave them more freedom and had fewer risks of sexual harassment. They began to develop an identity for themselves as workers and to see wastepicking as, “*socially relevant, economically productive and environmentally beneficial ‘work’*”. They realized that it was only through collective action that they could address their issues. The thirty women and SNTD activists began to reach out to other wastepickers.

In May 1993 they organized the first convention of wastepickers. More than 800 wastepickers from across the city were in attendance. They agreed to form the KKPKP as a union to represent their collective interests. Membership is open to men and women regardless of caste, region or religion. All members pay an annual fee. KKPKP is committed to taking up the immediate interests of wastepickers and to being part of broader struggles for a more just and equitable society. The union includes both men and women but it recognizes and works towards eradicating gender inequalities. KKPKP combines development activities with non-violent mass struggle as it recognizes that development activities cannot challenge structural inequalities. The KKPKP employs a range of innovative methodologies including street theatre and oral history to conscientize and mobilize members. KKPKP also consciously tries to build support for its members and activities amongst citizens.

The KKPKP has a President, General Secretary, Joint Secretary and Treasurer. There are eleven members on a Statutory Governing Board, the majority of whom are women. A Representatives Council consisting of 80 elected representatives (75 of whom were women in 2005) and the office bearers meet monthly and take decisions governing the union. Four paid staff members and a part-time accountant, all of whom come from the same social, economic and caste background as the members, are employed by KKPKP. Three activists from different social, economic and caste backgrounds who were involved in setting up the union are still involved in governance processes. In 2005 the KKPKP had 5025 registered members.

The KKPKP has taken up successful campaigns on issues including police harassment, extortion from municipal employees, exploitation by buyers who abscond with wastepickers’ money, violence against women, domestic violence, child labour and children’s education. Based on research that quantified the contributions of wastepickers the KKPKP demonstrated to municipalities how much money the reclaimers save the municipalities in transport costs and how much income they generate for the local economy. The union also established that the wastepickers make an important contribution to the environment. Backed up by these arguments the KKPKP mobilised to demand that municipalities recognize wastepickers as workers, and in 1995-6 two municipalities conceded to this demand. They endorsed the wastepickers’ identity cards, officially authorizing the wastepickers to collect scrap. In recognition of their contribution to the waste management system the Pune Municipal corporation also created a medical insurance scheme for all registered wastepickers. The KKPKP has also won important battles at a state level. The Maharashtra



state government has directed municipalities to register reclaimers and integrate them into solid waste management systems and has also included the children of wastepickers in a special scholarship scheme for children of people working in unclean occupations.

Municipalities in India are not required to collect waste from households. They are only obliged to provide public receptacles for garbage and to transport and dispose of this waste. 400 members of KKP KP are paid a monthly rate by 40,000 households and companies to collect source segregated garbage from them. The Pune Municipal Corporation now promotes the programme. The scheme has helped to dramatically increase the earnings of the participating wastepickers. But it has also created new challenges for the wastepickers who had to develop new ways of working as they made the shift to being service providers. As new central government regulations now require certain types of municipalities to conduct door-to-door collection the KKP KP is advocating this type of initiative as an alternative to privatization models which grant contracts to private companies and deny the wastepickers access to recyclable materials (Chikarmane and Narayan 2005<sup>135</sup>).



*A rag picker collecting recyclable material at Marina Beach in Chennai, India*

<sup>135</sup> If you would like to cite information on this case please refer to and cite the original report by Chikarmane and Narayan (2005) which can be found at [www.wiego.org/program\\_areas/org\\_rep/case-kkp kp.pdf](http://www.wiego.org/program_areas/org_rep/case-kkp kp.pdf).



# Chapter 6

## Recommendations

### **Recognition of reclaiming as a livelihood strategy**

National waste management policy and legislation must explicitly recognize that reclaiming is an important livelihood strategy for people in cities around the country.

There should be a commitment that initiatives to formalize recycling processes at the municipal level will strengthen the ability of reclaimers to generate income, increase their economic security and advance their position within the economy. Forms of privatization and enclosure that threaten the livelihoods of reclaimers should be rejected.

### **Health and safety**

The municipal officials in Msunduzi cited health and safety concerns as a reason not to formally allow reclaiming on the site. However, they turned a blind eye and informally allowed the reclaimers to work at the landfill. Ironically, this increased the health and safety hazards as the reclaimers were forced to work at a frantic pace during the limited time that they had access to the site. The experience in Palm Springs shows that when properly regulated the health and safety hazards of reclaiming can be radically reduced by creating more orderly work processes and providing reclaimers with protective clothing and equipment. Rather than being used as an excuse to bar reclaimers from landfills, concerns for health and safety should be a motivation towards the formalization and regulation of reclaiming activities.

### **Phased approaches to formalizing reclaiming and moving up the value chain**

Reclaiming recyclable materials from landfills and from bins is not the ideal way to access these resources. As the recyclable materials are mixed in with other refuse much will inevitably get lost along the way and end up in the landfill. Sorting through mixed waste is unpleasant and carries health risks for reclaimers. These hazards are exacerbated when reclaimers are working on landfills amongst heavy machinery. The answer is not, however, to simply decree that reclaimers cannot be on landfills or sort through bins as this robs them of their livelihood and leaves the municipality without a means to recover recyclable materials. The experience at Palm Springs shows that it is possible to develop orderly, safe and regulated methods for reclaiming materials on landfills that provide reclaimers with a secure income. Within a context of extremely high national unemployment levels it is advisable that where reclaimers are already working on landfill sites and in the streets means should be found to formalize



and regulate their labour within their current workspace. As such processes should involve reclaimers developing democratic reclaimer organizations the municipality will then have partners with whom to negotiate agreements regarding future reclaiming initiatives that involve separation at source higher up in the waste stream. If reclaimers are the main partners in these processes they will benefit from safer working conditions and higher incomes, and the municipality will have a more effective and efficient reclaiming programme that captures a greater percentage of recyclable materials. There are numerous international examples which could be explored. In Belo Horizonte, Brazil, the municipality diverts recyclable materials collected by the cleansing department to the Asmare collective's sorting warehouse (see box on p. 46). In Pune, India, as the municipality does not provide door-to-door collection services the reclaimers charge residents and companies a fee to collect their separated recyclable materials (see box on p. 46). As Chikarmane and Naryan note, however, it is important to cultivate solidarity and cooperation with municipal unions to ensure that this does not undermine public sector work or become a cheap way to privatize labour (Chikarmane and Narayan 2005). In the South African context, where we have door-to-door collection by municipal employees it will be critical for reclaimers and unions to develop common positions on involving reclaimers in door-to-door collection services that strengthen the public sector and provide reclaimers with secure incomes at least equivalent to municipal wages and with benefits. Depending on whether reclaimers wish to be municipal employees this could either entail making them municipal employees or developing innovative ways of incorporating them into the public sphere.

### **Addressing discrimination against reclaimers**

There is a need to address and rectify the discrimination faced by reclaimers. As a starting point government must sensitize officials at all three levels of the state to the valuable work that reclaimers do in promoting recycling and the ways in which they are supporting themselves and their families. Both government and civil society can advance this agenda through the use of media, public education campaigns and education within the schools. Innovative methods such as the carnival in Belo Horizonte in Brazil (see box on p. 46) should be explored. Such initiatives will need to start with sensitization of staff within government and civil society organizations themselves.

### **Involvement of reclaimers in policy processes**

Rather than leaving it to the discretion of municipalities to decide whether and how to allow reclaiming, national policy and legislation should explicitly recognize reclaimers as key stakeholders in sustainable waste management systems. Municipalities should be required to develop strategies to involve reclaimers within waste management policy processes. Due to currently low levels of organization and capacity amongst reclaimers municipalities will have to be proactive in seeking out reclaimers and facilitating independently conceptualized and organized capacity building for them so that they can effectively participate in these processes.



## Chapter 6 - Recommendations

### **Support for municipalities**

Currently there is a dearth of skills within municipal waste management departments to effectively address issues related to reclaiming and recycling. Through a participatory process involving reclaimers and organizations supportive of reclaimers national government should develop training programmes for relevant municipal officials and councillors in order to deepen their understanding of the social, political and economic issues related to reclaiming and provide them with the skills necessary to develop and implement policies in a participatory manner. National government will only be able to implement such a programme if it first brokers in and develops the relevant skills within its own structures.

### **Developing capacity to address waste as a social issue**

Recycling initiatives will run into unexpected problems and have unintended negative consequences if they do not take into account existing social relations within the waste management sector. Municipal waste management departments need to develop the capacity to: research how recycling is currently conducted within the municipality and by whom; understand the needs and challenges faced by reclaimers; consult and negotiate with reclaimers; and help to facilitate capacity building for reclaimers and their organizations. There are many ways in which this could be done. For example, the municipality of Belo Horizonte has a Social Mobilization Department which fulfils these tasks and also works with residents to sensitize them to the need to sort their waste and work respectfully with reclaimers (see box on p. 46 for further details). Similar initiatives should be undertaken by South African municipalities.

### **Role for municipal trade unions**

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and its local government affiliate, the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU), have adopted numerous resolutions to support the organizing workers in precarious and new forms of employment. Although reclaimers are not employed by municipalities they are working within municipal spaces (landfills and streets) and are an integral, if currently unacknowledged, part of municipal waste management systems. In keeping with their resolutions COSATU and SAMWU should explore how they can support and facilitate the organizing of reclaimers and how they can build solidarity between the struggles of municipal employees and reclaimers.

### **Support for building reclaimer organizations**

In most instances around the world external actors have helped to facilitate the organizing of reclaimers. As the box on p. 45-49 demonstrates, progressive Workers' Party local councils and the *Pastoral de Rua* have played a key role in Brazil, and in Pune, India, worker oriented academic units at universities have been actively involved. There is tremendous scope for local councils, unions and civil society organizations committed to social transformation to play a role in catalyzing the organizing of reclaimers in South Africa. It will be critical that any such initiatives be committed to ensuring the development of democratic organizations which are



controlled by reclaimers themselves. Within these processes it will be important to be aware of and actively engage with differences and divisions between reclaimers so as to ensure that the organizations are truly democratic and do not replicate existing structural inequalities.

### **Solidarity between NGOs, unions and reclaimer organizations**

NGOs active in the fields of environmental justice and labour rights, municipal trade unions and reclaimer organizations should explore the formation of coalitions and networks to collectively advance struggles for environmentally and socially just waste management systems.

### **Quantifying contributions to sustainability**

Reclaimers make an important contribution to sustainability by reducing the amount of waste being sent to the landfill and providing inputs for recycling processes. Municipal waste management departments should conduct studies to quantify the amount of material diverted from the landfill by reclaimers and calculate the contribution that this makes to extending the life of the landfill. This information should be included in Integrated Waste Management Plans and Integrated Development Plans as it can help municipalities to calculate future landfill needs.

### **Research**

There is a dearth of information on reclaiming and the recycling industry more generally. There is a need for research on issues such as: who reclaimers are; the different kinds of reclaiming work currently being conducted in South African cities; how they organize their work; how reclaimers relate to one another; how reclaimers fit into the broader recycling industry; the overall structure of the recycling industry; different municipal approaches to reclaiming and recycling. Such research should be focused on generating information and analysis that can be used by stakeholders in sustainable waste management systems to develop more inclusive and transformative approaches.



## Appendix A

### Appendix A – Focus Groups and Interviews Conducted

#### A. Focus Groups

##### **Emfuleni**

Boitshepe Reclaimers' Committee, September 9, 2008  
Women reclaimers at Palm Springs, October 6, 2008

##### **Metsimaholo**

Ditamating Committee, September 2, 2008  
Ikageng Committee, September 2, 2008

##### **Msunduzi**

Boy reclaimers, September 23, 2008  
Reclaimers, May 20, 2008  
Scrap Reclaimers, September 26, 2008  
Women reclaimers, September 25, 2008

#### B. Interviews

##### **Emfuleni**

Employee of buyer at Palm Springs Landfill, October 6, 2008  
Thembekil Dlamini, Motswako Community Project, September 11, 2008  
Maureen Dosoudil, Community member, former DA councillor, September 9, 2008  
Alma Ludidi, Manager Waste and Landfill Site Management and Oupa Loate, Superintendent Landfill Management, October 6, 2008  
Neels Haarmse, H and M Recycling, September 8, 2008  
Nicolaas Haarmse, H and M Recycling, September 8, 2008  
Johnny Mothibeli, Jomomatha CC, September 8, 2008  
Jacob Latele Motlounge, Letlotlo Recycling and Waste Transfer CC, September 8, 2008  
Oupa Loate, Superintendent Landfill Management, May 26, 2008  
Oupa Loate, Superintendent Landfill Management, October 6, 2008  
Palm Springs Steering Committee Members, September 9, 2008  
Reclaimers selling at H and M Recycling, September 8, 2008  
Reclaimers selling at H and M Recycling, September 9, 2008  
Woman reclaimer, Zone 11, September 11, 2008

##### **Metsimaholo**

Johann Labuschagne, Assistant Manager Health and Cleansing Services, September 3, 2008  
Leonard Loftus, Manager, Remade-Phutang, September 2, 2008  
Mapeka Solomon Sekela, Sekela Scrap, CC, September 3, 2008  
Metal reclaimer, September 3, 2008





Khulu Mtimkulu, Member of the Mayoral Committee, September 3, 2008  
Male paper reclaimer, September 3, 2008  
Peter Tau, Phutang, September 5, 2008  
Lusizi Thile, Manager Health and Cleansing, September 5, 2008  
Woman paper reclaimer 1, September 2, 2008  
Woman paper reclaimer 2, September 2, 2008  
Women paper reclaimers, September 3, 2008  
Zimbini Zwane, Community and Government Relations, Sasol, September 10, 2008

### **Msunduzi**

Timothy Ellis and Terry Ellis, Central Waste Paper, May 22, 2008  
Riaz Jogiat, Acting Manager Municipal Functions, May 20, 2008  
Riaz Jogiat, Acting Manager Municipal Functions, September 23, 2008  
Innocent Mhlongo, Landfill Foreman, September 25, 2008  
Hector Molefi, Landfill Supervisor, September 23, 2008  
Cyril Naidoo, Landfill Site Manager, May 21, 2008  
Cyril Naidoo, Landfill Site Manager and Richard Rajah, Manager for Waste Management,  
May 22, 2008  
Reclaimers, September 22, 2008  
SAMWU shopstewards, May 21, 2008  
SAMWU shopstewards, September 26, 2008  
Security guards, September 23, 2008  
Sobantu community representatives, May 21, 2008



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