



Organizing Reclaimers in Tshwane, South Africa

Lessons from Top Down and Bottom Up Experiences

By Melanie Samson



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The global research-policy-action network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) contain analysis of organizing strategies and practices in the informal economy. This series aims to support organizing efforts and disseminate better practices. They complement worker education materials produced by WIEGO's Organization and Representation Programme.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. History of Reclaimers and Committees on the Tshwane Landfills	2
3. Municipal Initiatives to Support Reclaimers	4
Unsustainable Projects	4
Building Buy-back Centres, Supporting Reclaimers?	5
Facilitating the Status Quo.....	9
Lessons and Openings.....	10
4. The Formation of the Tshwane Committee – Claiming Independence	12
Landfill Committees	12
Formation of the Tshwane Network	13
5. Accomplishments of the Network	16
Taking on Buyers.....	16
Forming Cooperatives.....	19
Sharing Information, Building Organization.....	20
Strength in Numbers and Common Positions.....	20
6. Challenges in the Network	22
Strengthening Democratic Structures at the Landfills.....	22
Building Viable, Democratic Cooperatives	22
Strengthening the Network	23
Clarifying the Network’s Objectives and Guiding Principles.....	24
7. Conclusion	25
References	26

1. Introduction

People have been reclaiming reusable and recyclable materials from the dumps in the Tshwane area for at least thirty years. In the past, the thirteen apartheid era racially segregated councils that now comprise the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Council were generally hostile to the reclaimers; councils either forced reclaimers to work for exploitative contractors or barred reclaimers from the landfills, using the police to evict reclaimers when they entered the sites. However, after protracted confrontations, the municipalities realized the futility of trying to lock out the reclaimers. In particular, the Greater Pretoria Metropolitan Council, which was the largest of the municipalities that merged to form Tshwane, decided it would be better to try to regularize its relations with the reclaimers and improve their working conditions. In 2000, just before it merged with the other councils, the Pretoria Council received funds from the then national Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) for a project to help the reclaimers form cooperatives and sell their materials collectively from buy-back centres also built with DEAT funding. This project collapsed, and the municipality reverted to the status quo: it does not evict the reclaimers, supports their right work on the landfills and meets with them to discuss safety issues, but does not proactively work with them to transform their position in the waste management system and recycling economy. However, the reclaimers are not passively accepting their current status. In early 2009, tired of feeling exploited by middlemen and undervalued and ignored by municipal authorities, reclaimers formed a Network. The Network consists of reclaimers working on the city's landfills and aims to negotiate with buyers and the municipality. As the global economic crisis of 2008 hit in full force and prices plummeted, this Network took on increasing importance.

The situation in Tshwane is quite unique in South Africa in that a relatively open Council and reclaimers have both engaged in activities seeking to improve the situation of reclaimers. This report explores both initiatives in order to distil lessons regarding how to support organizing by reclaimers and efforts to transform their position in the waste management system and recycling economy. It is based on fieldwork conducted between June 2009 and March 2010. The fieldwork consisted of a number of interviews with groups and individuals: eleven focus group interviews with reclaimer committees at six landfills; seven individual interviews with reclaimer committee members and general reclaimers; three interviews with buyers; three interviews with municipal officials; one interview with the consultant contracted by the municipality to work with the reclaimers on the DEAT project as well as one interview with directors of two of the companies contracted to work on the project; one interview each with a Community Development Worker and a representative from a cooperative providing support to the reclaimers; participant observation in three network meetings; and informal discussions with reclaimers working at the landfills.

The report argues the Council's project failed because it relied on companies with a vested interest in supporting the reclaimers and had a short-term and inadequate approach to capacity building. By contrast, the reclaimer Network has made significant progress in its first year. It has managed to bring new buyers to some of the dumps, has had some success in negotiating prices, and has made advances in deepening the Network's understanding of the recycling economy. Moreover, the reclaimers are forming cooperatives to improve their economic position. Arguably, the Network's key achievements relate to how it is strengthening organizations at the landfills by sharing information and experiences and by building a collective organization with common approaches and demands. These achievements build its capacity to engage with government and industry in the future. The Network does, however, face a number of challenges that will need to be confronted and addressed if the current achievements are to be preserved and advanced.

The remainder of this report is divided into six sections. The first section provides a brief history of reclaimers on the Tshwane landfills. The second section explores the municipal initiatives to support reclaimers. The third section focuses on the formation and functioning of the Tshwane Network. The fourth section looks at the Network's accomplishments, and the fifth section highlights the Network's current challenges. The final section presents overall conclusions.

2. History of Reclaimers and Committees on the Tshwane Landfills

The City of Tshwane is one of three metropolitan municipalities in the province of Gauteng and is the administrative capital of the Republic of South Africa. In 2007, Tshwane's 2,345,908 inhabitants lived in 686,640 households (City of Tshwane 2009, 29). Just over a quarter (26.8%) of these households lived in informal dwellings, either in backyards or in informal settlements (City of Tshwane 2009, 30). As in the rest of the country, levels of unemployment here are high. In 2007 the unemployment level was 25.5% using a "strict" definition of unemployment and 38.3% using the "expanded" definition, which includes discouraged job seekers (City of Tshwane 2009, 10).

The 2007 census found that only 75.5% of households had their refuse removed once a week by the local authority or a contracted private company, a figure below the provincial average (City of Tshwane 2009, 32-33). Municipally owned landfills receive the collected waste. At the time of writing in March 2010, seven functioning municipal landfills existed in Tshwane. Garankuwa, Hatherley, Kwaggasrand, Ondestepoort and Shoshanguve all receive municipal and industrial waste. The Gartskloof landfill receives mainly organics and builders' rubble. The Temba landfill is quite small and is scheduled to close within a short period. As the city generates increasing amounts of waste, the landfills are quickly filling up, and two have closed in recent years; the Deerdepoot landfill closed in September 2008, and the Vahlala landfill closed in March 2009.

The Garankuwa landfill has the longest reported history of reclaiming; four of the current reclaimers stated they have been working there since 1982. One reclaimer had worked at Shoshanguve since 1987, and another had worked at Kwaggasrand since 1988. Most of these reclaimers had worked at other dumps previously, indicating that reclaiming has taken place in the area for at least thirty years.

'Reclaimer' is the word used by the council, the buyers and the reclaimers themselves when they refer to the workers who extract recyclables from the landfills (although some reclaimers reported through participating in a national workshop run by the NGO groundWork, they "learned that we are called waste pickers". A number of reclaimers have started using this term when they speak English in order to identify with the emerging national movement groundWork convenes under the term "waste pickers"). When speaking in local languages, the reclaimers refer to themselves as 'bagariesi'. According to the reclaimers, the term is drawn from seTswana, but they are unclear what word it is based on and are unsure of the meaning originally intended. However, they reported that they understand it to mean "someone looking for something valuable", "someone looking for good things", or "someone finding things that are useful". Clearly, the ways reclaimers define themselves emphasize they are doing important work when looking for and reclaiming valuable, useful items.

Although the reclaimers now have secure, regular and independent access to the landfills, this was not always the case. Only at the Garankuwa landfill have reclaimers reported they have never experienced problems accessing the dump. Their main challenge remains that, as the dump is so far on the outskirts of the city, very few trucks and buyers go there. At the other dumps, reclaimers have struggled to obtain access and gain their independence. Reclaimers at the Shoshanguve and Kwaggasrand landfills originally worked for contractors who had the sole right to remove recyclables from the dumps and who paid them exceptionally low prices for the materials they collected. When the contractor left the Shoshanguve landfill in 1995, the reclaimers stayed and continued to work on their own, selling to a buyer introduced to the dump by a reclaimer who had once worked at another landfill. However, when the contractor left Kwaggasrand in around 1999, the municipality kicked the reclaimers out.

The banning of reclaimers from the Kwaggasrand landfill was in line with the more general approach of South African municipalities at the time. Prior to the adoption of the new Waste Act in 2009, reclaimers did not feature in any South African legislation. Although some policy documents mentioned reclaiming and how to deal with it, they did not require those responsible

for waste management to engage with reclaimers or regulate their work. As landfill site managers who allowed reclaiming had to indemnify the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism from any responsibility, they had strong disincentive to allow reclaiming. They tended to officially ban reclaiming and deploy resources to keep reclaimers off the landfills (Benjamin 2007, 7-9).

For over a year once the reclaimers were evicted from the Kwaggasrand landfill, they would sneak in through holes in the fence and work from dawn until 7 am and then again from 4 pm until dark. They sold their materials to buyers who met them outside of the gates, but the police would burn any materials they found.. Similarly, when the Ondestepoort landfill opened in 1997, the reclaimers were chased by the “green beans” (security guards who wore green uniforms) and could only work after hours. They had faced the same situation at the Rosslyn dump, where they had worked before migrating to Ondestepoort due to a lack of materials. In addition, in 1999, 104 reclaimers left another dump due to overcrowding and moved to Hatherly because the informal settlements where they live surround it. Initially, however, Hatherly banned these reclaimers.

The reclaimers employed different strategies to gain access to the landfills. At Hatherley, they organized politically and fought their way in. Several of the original reclaimers were active members of the African National Congress (ANC). They approached the ANC branch in the area for support, explaining the landfill was the only place they could earn a living and that the Council should let them in so they could create jobs for themselves. From their history of struggle, the reclaimers knew that “change only happens when we toyi-toyi [protest]”. So, they raised funds to buy logs, which they used to block the two gates to the dump. They protested for two weeks until the Council and Company X (which managed the landfill) negotiated with an elected team of the reclaimers as well as with representatives from the ANC branch. A former Director from Company X at the time explained:

When we started, Hatherley was brand new. At one point in time, we tried to keep them [the reclaimers] out - they weren't allowed because of the permit. Because of so much pressure we had the police force there. I was in the limelight, in the firing line many times until at some point we said we are either going to continue fighting or we must bring them in and control them.

The Council and Company X decided to allow the reclaimers onto the landfill provided they agreed to establish a committee to represent them and enforce rules; these rules, which would be agreed on by the reclaimers and the company, would govern how reclaimers worked on site.

According to a former Director of Company X, “when the municipality saw that we took the fire out of them and they started co-operating, they [the municipality] said please help us - train them and please incorporate the other landfills”. Although it wasn't part of Company X's initial contract to do this, the company was keen to assist because it hoped if it could establish a reputation for being able to manage relations with reclaimers, it could gain contracts managing the other Tshwane landfill sites and landfills in other municipalities.

Company X began to visit the other landfills. It negotiated with the municipality to let the reclaimers work during regular working hours at Kwaggasrand and Ondestepoort as long as they formed committees and complied with the rules developed at Hatherley. The municipality contracted Company X to train the reclaimers in these rules, and once the training was complete, they were given access to the dumps. The training was conducted by someone to whom we will refer as Andile, who came to play a very important role in initiatives related to reclaimers in the city. One reclaimer from Kwaggasrand described what happened: “he [Andile] came to us telling us he would help us to come inside and work and he did”. An Ondestepoort reclaimer explained, “in a way he talked for us so that they could let us in to work here. He is the one who fixed everything for us”. Another added, “when we first met him we were so excited as he came with great hours as we were no longer going to start to work at three. He was like a hero to us!” As the formation of committees was central to Company X's plan for regularizing relations with the reclaimers, Andile helped the reclaimers at each dump call meetings and elect representatives.

3. Municipal Initiatives to Support Reclaimers

Once reclaimers were working on all the landfills, the municipality adopted a pragmatically progressive approach to engaging with them. It realized it would be extremely difficult and costly to remove the reclaimers and prevent them from re-entering the sites. It also understood that, in the absence of formal recycling systems in the municipality, the reclaimers played a critical role in helping the municipality to reduce the amount of recyclables going to the landfill, saving the municipality money and space required to bury the city's garbage. The Head of Landfill Operations explained:

I mean the material is there! The better they perform the better we are performing on reducing our waste, as you take a commodity out of the waste stream and reuse it instead of disposing it and filling up landfill sites endlessly. And most of the materials they are using like the tins and the glass and the plastic bottles contain air. So while they are doing the recycling they are also preventing you from landfilling air that is senseless. And the better they do the better is your performance.

Waste management officials also understood that by allowing reclaimers to continue working at the landfills, they were contributing to the Council's goals of reducing poverty and creating employment. This position was clarified by the Head of Landfill Operations:

We need to look at waste minimization and these people are there and they are in need...One day I had a medical doctor calling me. He said – how can we let someone do such a job? How can we let someone work in such harsh conditions? And I said, but you know these people are the poorest of the poor. They have no income, they haven't got a job. Now they have an opportunity where they can get something for free, they can sell it into the market, they can work as entrepreneurs by themselves, they can address their family's needs, they can accommodate a family and supply their family and do a day's honest work while we are at work as well and they don't go around stealing and whatsoever. How do you want to tell me that I have to stop these people from making a decent living in an honourable way? And the guy fell silent and he said...his words were, Mr. Dekker, I am so terribly sorry, I wasn't thinking...

As a result, instead of evicting the reclaimers, the municipality “decided to rather enhance these people and uplift them and assist them to be entrepreneurs and support themselves”.

The opportunity to provide such support came when the then National Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) made funds available to support municipal initiatives linking the development of waste management infrastructure with job creation and poverty alleviation. Through this programme, DEAT provided grants to projects that were community driven, focused on job creation, created tourism-related recycled products, and were governed by a Project Steering Committee that included all relevant stakeholders. The Greater Pretoria Metropolitan Council submitted a proposal to DEAT, and in March 2000 it received a R1,594,000 grant for the Greater Pretoria Waste Clearing Projects.

Unsustainable Projects

The first phase of the Pretoria project tried to create jobs by making new products out of recycled materials. The project hired reclaimers who already worked on the dumps in Mamelodi (Hatherley Landfill), Atteridgeville (Kwaggasrand Landfill) and Shoshanguve (Shoshanguve Landfill) and unemployed local residents from the surrounding townships to make handbags out of plastic bags recovered from the dumps. In total, the project eventually employed thirty people and, in line with a directive from DEAT, paid the workers each R900 per month.

Unfortunately, the project quickly ran into problems. The handbags sold for R135, but according to municipal officials, the labour costs to produce each bag came to R175. On top of this, the plastic bags reclaimed from the dumps were too dirty, so the project ended up buying new plastics bags from supermarkets. This not only made the project even more expensive and financially unsustainable, but also undermined its objective of minimizing waste and re-using recyclable materials.

The project managers decided to stop producing handbags and focus instead on collecting, crushing and selling glass. However, this too proved to be uneconomical. Management alleged that because workers received a fixed wage, they exhibited high levels of absenteeism and low productivity. Regardless of whether this was true, the project was clearly losing money: according to project reports, in a three month period in 2002, the project earned R22, 622 for the glass that it sold, but had to pay wages of R52,500. Even when delays in payments for materials collected but not yet sold were factored in, the glass project did not seem to be a viable operation.

Due to such problems, the project management decided to stop funding these initiatives and focus on different activities they felt would be more sustainable and of longer term benefit. The funding from DEAT was for a limited amount and time period. Once it was exhausted, it was impossible for the project to continue as its costs outstripped its income. Understandably, people who had become used to receiving a salary and working in safer, cleaner conditions did not want to return to the precarious work of salvaging recyclables from the dump. As the Deputy Director for SMME Development and Support Services in the municipality explained, "once the fund was exhausted the legal claims streamed in. People started vandalizing the project's assets. Fights ensued, claims were thrown around. The model was flawed from the beginning". Although initially the municipality had received the funds from DEAT, in September 2001, it had made a decision to fund the project directly. The municipality created the Tshwane Environmental Development Trust to receive the money from DEAT and oversee the project. As a result, when the workers tried to make claims against the initial DEAT project, no assets could be attached. Workers were left unemployed and without compensation.

Building Buy-back Centres, Supporting Reclaimers?

In the second phase of the project, the municipality and the Tshwane Environmental Development Trust decided to take a different approach. Instead of creating new activities like the production of handbags, they focused on finding ways to support reclaimers in the work they were already doing. Company X, which was still managing the Hatherley Landfill, approached the Council and the Trust with a proposal. It argued that companies buying recyclables preferred cleaner materials, and that reclaimers could get higher prices if their materials were cleaned and properly sorted. Company X proposed the remainder of the funds from DEAT be used to build buy-back centres – essentially warehouses at the dumps where reclaimers could sort their materials and sell them collectively, which would increase the prices they could receive. Company X also suggested the reclaimers be given training on how to collect, sort and clean materials, as well as support to form a cooperative that could manage the buy-back centres.

On April 25, 2002, the Council approved spending the R951,000 left in the DEAT grant on the establishment of three buy-back centres. The Trust issued a tender to build buy-back centres at the Hatherley landfill in Mamelodi and at the Kwaggasrand landfill in Atteridgeville. The Shoshanguve landfill was not included as it was scheduled to close within a short period. Because there was not sufficient money available to buy machinery or equipment, the buy-back centres were really just large sheds where the reclaimed materials could be kept before sale.

Company X received the tender to build the buy-back centres and provide training to the reclaimers. Although the project's stated aim was to support the reclaimers, as noted above, Company X had a vested interest in regularizing the reclaiming of recyclable materials at the

dumps. Municipal and project managers claim they did not initially foresee the trouble that could arise from this conflict of interest. However, a range of problems quickly engulfed the project.

Neither reclaimers nor the Project Manager could discern who employed Andile. In addition, the Project Manager argued Andile made purposefully misleading comments that created the false impression Company X owned the buy-back centres. In fact, Company X was only contracted to build the centres. The municipality owned them, and they were meant to benefit the reclaimers. Even when the Project Manager tried to explain otherwise, many of the reclaimers still believed Andile worked for the municipality, not for Company X. According to the Project Manager, his assurances had little effect because reclaimers had much more contact with Andile than with municipal representatives:

[Andile] was saying we are going to own these buildings and some of you will be chased away. And I said no, you won't be chased away. That is why [Andile] became so unpopular, as he was using the name of Tshwane as a threat. And the poor reclaimers thought he was actually coming from Tshwane and when I walked in I said he is not from Tshwane they said 'who are you?' [And I said] 'No, no, no I am actually the guy responsible for this! We are the ones who are building these things for you'. And they said, 'OK, you are building the stuff for us and then you will give it to [Andile] and [Andile] is threatening us'. It was like, oh, I don't know how to call it, it was like a yo-yo. This one says this, this one says that. And for goodness sake our goal was to protect the reclaimers, and surely the aim of protecting them was to not be exploited by the buyers!

Reclaimers had mixed feelings about the usefulness of the technical training Andile conducted. Some argued it was helpful to learn the proper names of the recyclable materials and to receive guidance on how to work more safely. As one reclaimer from Kwaggasrand explained, "the workshop was useful as we were taught about the dangers at the landfill as there are some things we aren't supposed to pick up that can give you cancer". But most felt they did not gain much from the training. A reclaimer from Ondestepoort Landfill offered these comments:

According to me it was not useful because he was telling us we mustn't fight, make fire, mustn't steal the material of these people who came to loot here. So for me if you know you are someone good you won't do all of those things. For me it wasn't useful.

Nevertheless, he and the other reclaimers attended the training because of fear; constant threats from Andile suggested if reclaimers did not attend training, he would kick them out of the dump. The reclaimers were united in their bitter disappointment that most did not receive the promised certificates for having attended the training.

The most serious problems with the project related to the formation of the cooperative and the management of the buy-back centres. There exists some disagreement and confusion regarding whether a cooperative was actually formed. The Local Economic Development (LED) Department in the municipality and the former Directors of Company X reported that a cooperative called the Tshwane Waste Management Co-operative was formed. However, not a single reclaimer who was aware that a cooperative had been created could be found. Even the Project Manager stated he did not think a cooperative had been registered, and the former Directors of Company X reported they did not provide any cooperative training. As the Director in the LED Department acknowledged, even if a cooperative existed on paper, it certainly never functioned in reality.

Without a proper organization or support, it is not surprising that reclaimers could not successfully run the buy-back centres. In February 2003, the municipality agreed to take responsibility for the project back from the Trust as long as DEAT agreed to provide the outstanding funds. So, municipal and project officials became more directly involved in trying to make the buy-back centres successful. They believed the short experience had shown the

reclaimers incapable of running the buy-back centres on their own. After discussions with the reclaimers, the municipality decided to issue a tender for a company to manage the buy-back centres on behalf of the reclaimers. The first tender was issued in November 2003. Three companies submitted proposals, and Company X emerged as the preferred bidder.

However, the municipality did not award the contract as buyers raised concerns that, as a buyer, Company X would have an unfair advantage and too much control over the market if it was also managing the buy-back centre for the cooperative. So, the municipality issued a new tender in late 2004/early 2005. This tender clearly stipulated only “waste management companies” who are NOT related to “waste-buying-companies” would be able to bid so as to ensure the management company could not manipulate prices paid to reclaimers. In an attempt to further ensure against exploitation, the tender also stated the successful bidder would have to gain the written support of organized reclaimers at each landfill.

Three companies bid for the second tender. On May 11, 2005, the municipality granted a three year contract to Company Y, which was a consultancy owned by one of the Directors of Company X and which hired Andile.. The contractor would make the bulk of its money from sales by charging buyers 7.5% of turnover. Although this contractor would charge the municipality, the charge would be just the minimal amount of R36,000 over the entire 36 month period. The contract made clear that no buyer could be excluded from buying at the landfills and the principle of selling to the highest bidder would apply. It also stated that Company Y had the right to enforce quality control measures.

On paper, the municipality had taken steps to ensure the reclaimers’ interests would be protected and they would not be exploited by the management company. However, the municipality had failed to take into consideration the social relations on the ground and how these impacted the contracting process. The reclaimers had endorsed Company Y’s bid for the contract, but this was because they believed it was Andile who had helped them to secure the right to work on the dumps. As one reclaimer explained, they agreed to work with Andile because they “saw that he helped us. We trusted him he was like a hero to us...because if you started to work and they tried to chase you then he would speak for you”. This history also created a power dynamic that made it hard for the reclaimers to disagree with Andile or assert their independence. As one reclaimer explained, “we had no power to fight him because he was the one who made us to work here without the municipality kicking us out”. A number of reclaimers reported they were afraid if they did not support him, Andile would chase them out of the dump, something they reported he had threatened to do. In addition, as noted above, even the Project Manager acknowledged many reclaimers believed Andile when he said the buy-back centres belonged to him and to Company X. Although Company Y received the management contract, everyone knew Andile had been employed by Company X, which had built the buy-back centres and claimed to own them. So, it was quite sensible for the reclaimers to still associate Andile with Company X and to see the buy-back centres as belonging to him.

The municipal and project officials interviewed in 2009 and 2010 agreed the project quickly unravelled as Companies X and Y exploited the management contract to their own benefit. The Director in the LED Department explained what happened by saying Companies X and Y employed a “guerrilla strategy”:

Andile partnered with [Company X]. We contracted [Company X] to set up the centres. They were supposed to train and institutionalize the reclaimers. They did do that. That is where the whole guerrilla strategy started. [Company X] is a formal company. They thought we didn’t see what is happening. They wanted a monopoly of the landfills, purely to benefit from it. That means that the reclaimers will just have to sell to them. They will still use them but they are forced to sell to one entity and they can control prices.

The Project Manager made the same point:

early on we realized the idea of forming a coop was to have a monopoly on the merchandise. That was the aim... the objective of forming a cooperative was good, but then who was spearheading the coop? The guys who built the buy-back centre! At the end of the day these guys [the reclaimers] would say, why should I sell to you, you know, when I could sell to [David], he is prepared to give me 50 cents extra. You are selling it at 20 cents. I have a right. Don't tell me because you put up a structure, because we are a coop, I cannot sell to A or B...Shouldn't we decide who to sell to as a coop, not only to be confined to a particular company?

As one reclaimer summed up, "he [Andile] never gave us any light on how to organize ourselves, he wanted us to work under him and he would give us low prices for our materials, so that he could get more profit". Another reclaimer elaborated, saying "we were under him...he would instruct us that we get so much for different materials. He was negotiating with them alone...[we let him do that] as we didn't have enough power to fight him then because he was leading us at that moment".

The reclaimers were infuriated that a project meant to empower them had ended up effectively placing them under the control of a large company and reducing their income. They toyi-toyied [protested] at the municipal offices. Municipal officials confronted Andile and told him he was in violation of his contract, which clearly stated all buyers must have an equal opportunity to purchase the materials. According to the municipal officials, Andile fled, and the project completely collapsed. The former directors of Company X also noted they lost the contract to manage the Hatherley landfill, so their primary incentive for working with the reclaimers was removed. In late 2009, only the buy-back centre buildings remained. Buyers took these buildings over and used them to weigh and store purchased materials.

When asked why the municipality did not try to salvage the project, the Director in the LED Department explained the municipality lacked both a budget and ideas:

Number one, I didn't have any budget to do it. Ok, number 2, the buy-back centres, the landfill sites are primarily the responsibility of waste management, ok? The third reason might be, if I think about it, I must admit I ran out of ideas. I've never said this about any project before... I eventually ended up thinking to myself - let me state it this way - if the reclaimers can have good infrastructure, a place where they can clean themselves, wash themselves, have a dignified workplace, a processing space where they can bale their product, clean it, store it, those things - storage, processing facilities, ablution facilities - if they can have those, their product would have been of a high quality. Then at a secondary level, where they've been good all this years, they manage their own product, they sell their own product off the landfills, there could be a better organized system for themselves, because what curtails them enormously is the fact that they don't have infrastructure. Ok, so what should have happened at the landfill sites, which I didn't have budget for, are basically those which I indicated.

After the attempt to build a cooperative selling reclaimers' materials failed, the Director felt the best the city could do would be to provide reclaimers with physical infrastructure to improve their working conditions and the quality of their materials. Summing up what he thought would be the best way forward, he stated, "I believe...that government should recognize the reclaimers, which they do now, provide them with the infrastructure that I indicated, and then they would be in a better position to look after themselves. Then it might even be lucrative for literate reclaimers to remain".

Facilitating the Status Quo

Since the project ended, the municipality has generally limited itself to maintaining the status quo – it protects the reclaimers from being overtaken and controlled by large buyers, but largely leaves them to manage their own affairs. For example, when DEAT made funding available for building a third buy-back centre at the Ondestepoort Landfill, both the waste management and LED departments opposed the project as they believed it undermined the reclaimers. The Head of Landfill Operations explained this opposition:

The bottom line is in the end of the day they wanted to take the whole enterprise over and have these guys working for them... One of the guys said, but we are going to do job creation. I said OK, how many jobs will you create? No [he said] 150. I said, OK, but there are 450 reclaimers on the landfill site. What are you going to do with the other 300? I said no, then you aren't creating jobs, you are taking people's opportunities away. At the end of the day the buy-back centre didn't happen.

The waste management department stated it valued and respected the work of the reclaimers. The Head of Landfill Operations insisted on calling them reclaimers, saying, "whenever people start speaking about waste pickers or scavengers I say listen, whoah! Let's stop the lorry there. These people are trained people and they do a very honest, hard days' work. I mean, you can't disgrace their value. And you need to have respect around this". He allowed them to build temporary structures on the dumps so they could have somewhere to change, store their things and seek refuge from the hot sun. He also permitted the reclaimers at Ondestepoort to hire their own private security to guard their materials. He accepted their right to work at the landfills to such an extent that when the Derdepoort and Vahlala landfills closed, he negotiated with the committees at other landfills to allow the displaced reclaimers to "follow the trucks," that is, to go work at the landfills to which the municipal waste trucks were diverted.

In return for allowing the reclaimers to work on the landfills, the Head of Landfill Operations expected them to obey basic rules regarding safety and to pick up litter at the landfill sites twice a day. While he considered this a fair deal, the reclaimers complained they were helping the city by removing recyclables from the landfills and they should not be forced to clean the landfill for free. As one reclaimer explained, it was "the idea of apartheid but now because things have changed he should pay us".

The Head of Landfill Operations reported that, in the beginning, he held frequent meetings with the reclaimers. Communication was particularly regular during the time of the DEAT project, when the reclaimers needed to be consulted about project activities. At that time, a project steering committee, which consisted of reclaimer representatives from each dump, Company X, Company Y, the LED Department and the Waste Management Department, met on a regular basis. However, the Head of Landfill Operations said in more recent years, the caretakers at each landfill met with the reclaimer committees once a month. He was proud that "we even proved industry wrong that you can do recycling on a landfill site and have a proper landfill site that is being well run".

The Head of Landfill Operations was, however, careful to draw a line between what was required to create space for the reclaimers to do their work and proactively assisting them or taking responsibility for them:

They also wanted us to supply overalls and gloves and safety shoes and all of that. But I said, you know what, we allow you to reclaim here for free. If you don't like it then you don't need to come here. But we can't give this stuff to these people because they are not city council employees. They take this stuff they go and sell it. You have no power around it. And how am I going to explain to the tax payer what are we doing with their money giving these guys uniforms and shoes and stuff like that? They take it, not using it for work and they go and sell it. They say yah, you can

prevent them from reclaiming. I said but you come, you prevent them to do that. It is impossible, you won't. So they supply their own material, they supply their own. They have to supply themselves with all their needs. Even if it is required for them to buy their water then they buy their water. I mean it is not our responsibility to supply that. But water is there and we, ya, we do supply them with water that they can get the water. They can drink water, they can wash with the water whatever.

Importantly, the municipality has never formalized the relationship with reclaimers into a policy. Moreover, although the waste management department recognizes reclamation of materials prolongs the lives of the landfills and helps reduce poverty in the city, reclaimers have not been mentioned in the municipality's Integrated Development Plan or Integrated Waste Management Plan. Since the collapse of the DEAT funded project, no efforts have been made to proactively work with the reclaimers to change and improve their position within the waste management system or recycling economy.

The Director in the LED Department still believed that, in theory, the original approach could work if the reclaimers had a self-run cooperative run that managed product sale, but he did not see how it would be possible to develop their capacity to do so. He attributed the cooperative's failure to high levels of illiteracy amongst the reclaimers and a high turnover of those who were more literate. However, in countries across the developing world, reclaimers have successfully formed and sustained cooperatives, which manage the sale of their materials, and have negotiated a better collective position for reclaimers in the municipal waste management systems and recycling industries (Chikarmane and Naryan 2005; Dias and Alves 2008; Gutberlet 2008; Samson 2009). As will be outlined in the next section, it is arguable the real problems lay in the approach the municipality took to building and supporting the cooperative.

Lessons and Openings

Unlike many other South African municipalities, the Tshwane Municipality accepts reclaimers are working on its landfills. Instead of trying to chase them out, it has tried to find ways to support them in the work they do and to improve their conditions. Although the attempt to create buy-back centres controlled and run by a reclaimer cooperative failed, many lessons can be learned from this process. In addition, as the remaining sections of this report make clear, the opening up of regular access to the dump as well as the creation of committees and the establishment of relations between these committees laid an important foundation for more autonomous organizing by the reclaimers in the current period.

The key lesson from the first phase of the project teaches if recycling projects are to provide secure, stable incomes for reclaimers and be financially viable, then projects cannot rely only on the sale of recyclable materials and /or new products produced out of recyclable materials. As the Head of Landfill Operations acknowledged, by removing materials from the waste stream, these projects save airspace, prolong the life of the landfill, and therefore save the municipality money. Consequently, the reclaimers should be compensated for their contribution to the waste management system. This approach has been successfully adopted in Diadema, Brazil, where reclaimer cooperatives are paid the same amount per tonne for recyclables diverted from the landfill as waste disposal companies are paid to put waste into the landfill (Gutberlet 2008, 137).

The main lessons from the project's second stage relate to challenges in building the capacity of democratic, reclaimer-controlled cooperatives that act effectively in reclaimers' best interests. In the eyes of municipal officials, the project was doomed not only because of low levels of literacy amongst the reclaimers, but also because, as officials believed, Company X misled everyone, and its "malafide intent was never to set up a proper cooperative". However, the municipality itself created the situation in which large companies could manipulate the process first by recommending the contract be awarded to Company X, then by granting it to a company linked

to Company X. Truly independent organizations with experience in developing and supporting the formation of cooperatives should have been brought in to provide ongoing support to the reclaimer cooperatives. Rather than relying on reclaimers to identify organizations they could support, the municipality and other support organizations should have proactively identified a number of organizations with appropriate skills and experience. A proper tender process should have been followed, during which the reclaimers could identify the organization they felt most comfortable working with. Specific knowledge and expertise related to the recycling sector could then have been brokered in as required. In addition, simply providing capacity building workshops was clearly not sufficient. Rather, the reclaimers required the continuous assistance of advantageous processes as they built their capacity to run the cooperative.

The project's failure led the LED Director to conclude too many obstacles exist to successfully form a reclaimer cooperative. However, as is discussed in the following section, starting in 2009, the reclaimers successfully organized across the city's landfills into a city-wide Network and are currently working to form and register their own cooperatives. This mobilization clearly disproves the assumption reclaimers do not have the basic skills and commitment required to form reclaimer-controlled organizations. Greater attention needs to be paid, therefore, to how reclaimers are organizing themselves. As they encounter challenges in developing organizations run for and by themselves, reclaimers also need ongoing, sustained processes that provide relevant support.

4. The Formation of the Tshwane Committee – Claiming Independence

After the DEAT project collapsed and Andile disappeared, the reclaimers continued to work independently through landfill committees to try to improve their conditions. In 2009, they took their organizing to a higher level by forming a city-wide network of all the committees from the various landfills. As the landfill committees provide the base for the emergence of this new network, this section begins by providing an overview of how the committees are structured and what they do. It then explores how they came together to form the Tshwane Network.

Landfill Committees

The reclaimer committees at each of landfill consist of between eleven and sixteen members and have a chairperson, deputy chairperson, secretary, deputy secretary and treasurer. Most of the landfills also have disciplinary committees that include people not on the main committee. All committees have a practice of trying to elect equal numbers of men and women to the main committee. The Chairperson at Ondestepoort explained this, stating, “let me speak about the past in South Africa the women were not considered [the same] as men. Men were recognized [more] than women. So now things have changed that is why we want to involve women here in this committee.” However, it is important to note there are clearly defined ideas regarding which roles are appropriate for different people to fill. Except at Temba landfill, where almost all of the reclaimers are women, all of the other chairpersons are older men and all of the secretaries are younger men. Women occupy positions as deputies or as general members. Committee members generally felt it was useful to have older men act as chairpersons as they command authority to enforce decisions. Although foreigners work at all of the landfills, only Garankuwa has a non-South African on its main committee. Arguably, the maintenance of a gender, age and national hierarchy hinders the ability of other committee members who exhibit strong leadership skills to contribute fully to organization on the landfill. The committees do not hold regular elections and only replace members when reclaimers mobilize to kick someone out. Committees also do not have constitutions that clearly establish what they do and how they do it.

Many of the current committee members have been on the committees since the very beginning. Interestingly, other than the ANC members in Hatherley, most had not previously been involved in other community or political organizations. Committee members at all of the dumps reported that, especially at first, it was difficult to get some reclaimers to support the formation of the committees. However, most reclaimers realized that having committees could help them address issues of violence, theft, alcohol and drugs at the dumps. The committees gained authority, and their rules were collectively imposed by the majority of reclaimers at the landfills, which meant even those who did not support the committees had to comply.

One leader, who has been on the committee since it was founded in Garankuwa, explained that he used to sell drugs but agreed to stop if reclaimers worked together and formed a committee; he thought this would help reclaimers be taken more seriously and advance. Other leaders provided a host of reasons why they gave their time to participate on the committees: wanting to bring order to the dump; wanting to fight for their rights and improve their conditions; not trusting the other representatives and wanting to guard against corruption; wanting to learn and gain new skills; and wanting to act responsibly. One woman explained her motivation to give up her time to participate in the committee, stating, “it’s just an act of responsibility, showing that as a person you are responsible and make sure that our dump does not shut down so that we can keep working”. The committee members reported that, in addition to improving conditions at their landfills, participating on the committees brought them a number of personal benefits: learning to work with others; assisting them to overcome shyness; learning to feel comfortable speaking

to large groups of people; improving their English; and helping them to feel more confident confronting authority in other settings such as their children's schools.

Where they do not have employers or managers, the committees see their main task as creating orderly and safe working environments. They ensure people do not steal or fight and do not damage the vehicles coming to offload waste. In addition, at Ondestepoort, each reclaimer contributes R80 per month to pay for three private security guards, two of whom carry guns, to guard their materials at night. Each committee has developed its own system of penalties to enforce the rules of the dump, which involve being banned from the landfill for varying lengths of time depending on the violation. When asked how committees manage to enforce these penalties, one reclaimer responded, "you can't fight with the whole community". The power of the committees, therefore, hinges on the general level of support from reclaimers at the landfills.

The committees also play a central role in ensuring more generalized access controls at the landfills. All stated there is no room for additional reclaimers, so committees prevent new people from coming to work at the landfill. Although this is more difficult at Shoshanguve and Hatherley, where the landfills are located right beside informal settlements, the unity of the current reclaimers and the threat of collective violence against newcomers help them preserve their monopoly over the space. The fact that, as they also had no other prospects of earning a livelihood, most of the current reclaimers fought their way onto the landfills does not deter them from their determination to keep others out.

Finally, the committees are all charged with finding new buyers and negotiating prices. They use creative strategies to find buyers, such as taking numbers down from the sides of recycling trucks driving through the streets. Several of the committees have appointed members responsible for investigating prices. The Secretary at Ondestepoort explained "we are always fighting with them because when we see the prices down we investigate [the prices at] the biggest company. When we find that they are robbing us we go straight to them and ask them why they buy with a lower price". Sometimes committees succeed in getting higher prices. However, this is easier to do at the more centrally located landfills that have more buyers. At landfills like Garankuwa, where the buyers have little competition, the reclaimers wield less bargaining power. As buyers in the industry are very secretive about their prices, the only way for reclaimers to get prices from the larger buyers is to go and sell reclaimed materials to them. Ideally, reclaimers would sell directly to buyers on a regular basis. However, due to lack of transport, reclaimers are not currently able to do so.

Formation of the Tshwane Network

The desire to engage more effectively with buyers over prices sparked the idea to form the Tshwane Network. The first key issue driving the reclaimers to unite was the drop in prices linked to the global economic crisis. In early 2010, the Chairperson of the Garankuwa dump explained how the Network began to form:

We started forming this last year when the prices started dropping. We said let's move around and see if prices are dropping in all the places or only here. They [the committees at the other dumps] also wanted to know us as they didn't know us. We were working this side. Everyone was just working in his own place. They then phoned me and they asked me to go for a meeting at Ondestepoort.

The way buyers paid different prices at different dumps and tried to play the reclaimers off against each other constituted the second key issue. The Chairperson of the Ondestepoort Committee, who spearheaded the initiative to form the Network, explained that he decided to try to bring all of the dumps together:

Because when somebody comes here and says, 'I am buying plastic with R1.00, and you say the price is too small, he'll say okay I'll go to Kwagga because I can buy it

for only R1.00'. So I saw that is a problem. So that is why we have decided that all landfills must come together and be one. If a person goes to Kwagga or anywhere else he must find same story [prices].

He further explained his efforts:

I put my effort into trying to get contacts in other dumps. I managed to get their contact numbers and then we had a meeting here. The reason why I did it was a matter of pride. The buyers were very cheeky. They would come here with one price and then have another price at a different place. We needed to get rid of that. The only way to do that was for us to meet.

It was not difficult for the Ondestepoort Chairperson to make contacts at the other landfills as there have always been strong links between Tshwane's landfills. Some landfills are located near one another. Others are on major roads and train routes, so reclaimers pass by as they travel through the city. A number of reclaimers reported they had visited other dumps in the past in order to find out conditions and explore options. Some reclaimers switched landfills when they moved homes or felt another landfill offered better access to materials. As noted above, when dumps closed, the reclaimers "followed the trucks" to the new landfills, sometimes with the assistance and support of the waste management department. During the time of the DEAT funded projects, the leadership of the landfill committees met at steering committee meetings, and Andile occasionally invited leaders to meetings at each other's dumps. When the Network Chairperson decided to call the first Network meeting, he asked reclaimers he knew at other dumps for the cell phone numbers of landfill committee chairpersons. When he did not have contacts, he asked the very buyers threatening to buy at lower prices at these other sites to give him the leaderships' contact details.

The first Network meeting, held in early 2009, was attended by only a few dumps. Over the course of the year, the Network called and visited other dumps and encouraged them to participate. By March 2010, reclaimers from all seven municipal dumps and one private dump were participating in the Network.



The Network meets once a month. Approximately six representatives from each landfill attend the meetings. At the Ondestepoort Landfill, the reclaimers' monthly contributions to collective activities such as security cover the costs of participating in the meetings. The other landfill committees ask every reclaimer to donate money for delegates to attend each specific meeting.

Each meeting is held at a different landfill site. The Network delegates purposefully decided to rotate meetings so they can see the conditions and learn from the experiences at each landfill. Having the meetings at different landfills also means reclaimers who are not delegates to the Network can see what happens at the meetings and meet the different landfills' representatives. The general reclaimer population at each landfill hosts the meetings held at their site. Meeting spaces at the landfill sites are always beautifully prepared with tables, chairs, table cloths and ornaments reclaimed from the dumps. The hosts also provide snacks, cold drinks and a cooked lunch at the end of the meeting. The February 2010 meeting in Hammanskraal actually took place at the municipal offices near the landfill, demonstrating the growing ability of the reclaimers to engage with the municipality.

At the meetings, the Network discusses strategies to engage both buyers and the municipality. It also discusses problems at specific dumps and how to resolve them. At times, delegates make decisions to deploy leaders from the Network to help resolve issues at the landfill in question. In some cases, delegates make decisions in the meeting itself. For example, at the February 2010 meeting, women from the Hammanskraal dump reported that despite numerous attempts to discipline him and change him, one male reclaimer continued to harass and undermine them. After hearing his side of the story and conducting an extensive debate, the committee decided that the man should no longer be allowed to work at the dump. As the sentence was pronounced, he packed his things and left. The Network has clearly established the authority to take and enforce decisions.



5. Accomplishments of the Network

Within its first year, the Network has accomplished a great deal with respect to taking on buyers, forming cooperatives, sharing information, building organization and creating a common front.

Taking on Buyers

The initial motivation to form the Network was to get buyers to increase their prices, pay the same prices at all of the dumps, and stop playing the various landfills off each other. In order to achieve these goals, the Network has actively engaged with the buyers on several fronts.

First, through the Network, reclaimers at different landfills have helped each other identify new buyers. As one reclaimer from Garankuwa explained, “we do marketing of ourselves. Like at Onderstepoort when we go there for the meetings...They will ask us what do we need a buyer for and we will tell them its HL1 [white paper] and they will tell us to go to whomever buys that”. Through the Network, reclaimers also regularly exchange information on prices. When they discover that a buyer at another dump is paying higher prices, they try to negotiate with that buyer to come and purchase from them. This practice has already led to new buyers going to Shoshanguve and Hatherley.

Second, the Network has tried to negotiate prices directly with the buyers as a collective. Initially, it did this by developing common negotiating positions:

At the first meeting we basically talked about prices. We arranged how much we should charge. The prices were very different at the different dumps. The first time when we met the buyers they continued with their way of working. He [the buyer] would say “I will go to Kwagga”. So, I would call the chairperson and tell him not to sell.

The chairperson at Ondestepoort proceeded to explain he felt he could trust the reclaimers at the other dumps to stand by their agreed prices as “we are not only working on the dumps. We know people other than the chairperson. So, it hasn’t happened [that they have undermined us]”. As will be noted below, however, reclaimers at some dumps felt they had no option but to accept the prices offered as they had fewer buyers and no alternatives to turn to.

The Network then decided to engage the buyers collectively. In September 2009, it called all buyers to attend a meeting at the Kwaggasraand landfill. By this time, the global economic crisis had hit Tshwane’s recycling sector in full force. Reclaimers had experienced dramatic falls in their income. At Ondestepoort, where prices and volumes were highest, men who collect lucrative metals saw their incomes fall from R7,000-R8,000 per month to R4,000-5,000. At Garankuwa, which receives less waste and has fewer buyers due to its distance from the rest of the city, reclaimers experienced drops in incomes to even lower levels. Men who previously earned R1,200 per month reported they earned R600, and women who had earned R800 were earning as little as R300.

The reduction in their income had serious implications for the reclaimers. The effects varied between dumps because some dumps earned lower levels before and after the crisis and because of variations in the forms and levels of service delivery in areas where the reclaimers lived. While in some areas reclaimers had access to free water, in other areas where water was metered, reclaimers could no longer pay their water bills and were put on “trickle taps,” which reduce the flow of water to a slow drip. Those who had pre-paid electricity could no longer afford to have electricity every day of the month. In areas where reclaimers could not access free accommodation in informal settlements, many could no longer afford to pay for rent, so risked eviction. Some reclaimers had children who were no longer attending school as their families could not afford to pay school fees, even though it is illegal for schools to bar children from attending if their parents

cannot pay fees. A number of reclaimers reported they could no longer participate in collective savings groups. At Garankuwa landfill, incomes had dropped so low that when reclaimers passed away, the group could no longer afford to make contributions towards the burial.

As the chairperson at the September 2009 Network meeting explained to the buyers, the reclaimers were aware there was an economic crisis, but felt the extent of the drop in prices was unacceptable, as was the way in which the buyers did not communicate changes in the market. The Network had called the meeting in order to get the buyers to account for what was happening and to negotiate.

Five of the largest buyers at the Tshwane landfills attended the September 2009 meeting. One of the buyers began by arguing buyers were also suffering and had little control over prices – buyers were only middlemen who sell to the manufacturers:

We all know that what is happening in the world economy has affected us. With us buyers, in the past we have pushed [sold] raw materials as much as we could. Now they come to us with conditions. They give us quotas. Maybe this month I only get 10 tonnes. In the past if prices went up then they would call us and increase our prices. The problem now is that there is no demand. We must tighten our belts. We are not sure if we will have jobs tomorrow. I even told my people that I may reduce numbers. Even today there is 15 cents off the price of HD. The stuff that has oil on it, they don't want it. If we bail it and send it there they don't want it. They send it back. They check each load. We must tell you guys. The market is tight. We are not lying to you. What we need – we must tighten our belts and sacrifice. We all hope the market will get better.

Another buyer added, “with recyclable content they work on a percentage of virgin material. They work on a 60/40 basis. The price of recyclable can't exceed 40% of the price of virgin material. Now, the problem is there is no demand. We have a crisis, an economic crisis and there is no demand”. The buyers argued it was not the time to fight each other, and that the reclaimers and buyers should, rather, unite and together approach the municipality and national government about helping deal with the crisis.

Although some reclaimers believed the buyers' argument that the economic crisis had made prices drop, others were doubtful. Even if prices had fallen, after years of feeling exploited by the buyers, one reclaimer captured the feeling of many, arguing “the buyers will never be honest with us”. One reclaimer rationalized the Network should go with the buyers to the municipality because if it did this, then it could hear what the buyers would say. Several reclaimers argued they should go to the companies the buyers sell to in order to find out the real prices. Indeed, such investigations would be useful, as interviews with three of the buyers present at the meeting revealed that although all were hit by reductions in the amount of materials they could sell to the manufacturers and by higher electricity costs, some buyers did not experience a drop in material sale prices. Yet, they followed other buyers in dropping the prices paid to reclaimers. To cover the reduction in the prices they received as much as possible, buyers also offered equivalent decreases in prices paid to reclaimers, thus making reclaimers bear the brunt of crisis.

After asking the buyers to give their current prices, the Network then presented the prices it wanted to be paid. A buyer responded by saying, “we won't be buying at those prices. This is more than what we are paid”. Another buyer added “the last time we paid these prices prices were high. We can't work ...we can't even get these prices. And we also have a business. We are not manufacturers. We are buying and selling to someone else. If I am forced to pay these prices then I will close”.

Attempting to justify the differential in the price he received for the materials and the price he paid the reclaimers, one buyer argued, “for PET mixed – when I sell it I get R1.70. I must put these bins down, I must transport the materials. It is not about crooking you”. When a reclaimer

responded reclaimers also had costs, noting they paid to transport materials from the face of the landfill to the bottom to sell to buyers, the same buyer replied “let’s say I pay you R1.10 for PET. You pay, let’s say 5 cents for transport. You put R1.05 in your pocket. What must I put in my pocket? Let’s talk sense here”. The response infuriated the Network committee delegates. Once again, the reclaimer responded passionately and eloquently:

We need to be careful with these guys. Like when he said we spend 5 cents to get transport. We are talking about our lives. What is petrol when we are talking about our lives? These people are insisting that we get these things for free but they don’t understand that we are risking our lives. All of us from the different dumps must unite.

The meeting concluded with the reclaimers saying they would accept the prices for the time being, but the buyers must go away and discuss how they could improve prices. The reclaimers also warned they would continue to look for new buyers who would pay higher prices. As two out of the three buyers interviewed reported that over 90% of their materials comes from the Tshwane landfills and the other buyer reported that 40% comes from the dumps, the warning caused great concern. Several buyers made statements such as “we came here as we are the ones who are interested in you. So, please, the ones who are here should get preference”.

By March 2010, the buyers had not responded to the reclaimers’ demands, and the reclaimers had not followed up with them. Reclaimers at some of the landfills also found it difficult to carry through with threats not to sell unless their prices were met. As the chairperson from Garankuwa explained, “here we only have four buyers and they each only buy one material. So, if we say we won’t sell then we stay with our things”.

Although the reclaimers did not succeed in generally raising and harmonizing the prices at all of the dumps, they accomplished several other things through their collective interaction with buyers. First, the interaction changed the buyers’ perceptions of reclaimers and encouraged the buyers to take reclaimers more seriously as business and negotiating partners. One buyer explained what he thought about the meeting at Kwaggasraand dump:

I think they are much more organized...than they were in the past. Like I said they called all the different landfill committees, everybody was in one central place. It was weird, they were organized, there were tables and.... they served tea. And it was like a formal meeting! I was actually impressed. Everything was clean, there was cutlery, it was nicely set up. I was actually very surprised. I wasn’t expecting anything like that from the conditions they were working in....I don’t think I’ve got the perception that they are bad or lower class or anything like that. I never had that perception. It just surprised me that they put in so much effort into it as it actually shows that it means a lot to them. I was very surprised, because I didn’t expect that. If you look, some of the people are not educated at all that we deal with in our business.... I just think it was surprising that they did so much effort because it means that they care about what they are doing. It is their work. It is like it is their employment because that is where they get their money.

Just as significantly, forcing the buyers to account for the drop in prices helped the reclaimers gain important insights into how their work is integrated into and affected by the global economy. When reclaimers heard the buyers so clearly articulate how little they value the labour performed by the reclaimers and the costs that it imposes on them, as well as how the buyers justify their own profits, the reclaimers grew even firmer in their belief that they need to form cooperatives, obtain vehicles and equipment and start selling directly to manufacturers. As one reclaimer explained, “when the buyers came here [to the landfill] we underestimated our work. Sometimes you find a buyer – when he starts to come he has a small car. After has worked with us he has a luxury car from working with us. So we realised we can do the same thing”.

Forming Cooperatives

While the municipal LED department has concluded it is virtually impossible for reclaimers to form and successfully run cooperatives, reclaimers have, in fact, made significant progress on their own. For instance, a few of the landfills had some experience in trying to work cooperatively prior to the formation of the Tshwane Network. At Garankuwa, the reclaimers had all contributed money to buy a scale and had sold their materials collectively in order to earn a higher, bulk price. However, the scale broke, and they did not have money to fix it, so they reverted to selling individually. In around 2004, reclaimers at Hatherley landfill had gone so far as to register a cooperative called the Yebo Mayibue Cooperative. A larger cooperative called Yebo Cooperative, which, with assistance from a German donor, provides training to other cooperatives, assisted the Hatherly cooperative in registering. The cooperative opened a bank account, and reclaimers opened individual savings accounts. The cooperative has, however, never been functional, although there are current attempts to revive it.

Reclaimers interested in forming a cooperative at Ondestepoort had heard about Hatherly's Yebo Mayibue. They obtained the contact details for Yebo Cooperative from their colleagues at the other dump, and in 2008, held a few initial meetings. Only after the Network formed and held discussions about the power of organizing collectively and the possibility of removing the middlemen, did the Ondestepoort reclaimers mobilize to form a cooperative.

The Ondestepoort cooperative was officially registered in August 2009. It is called Yebo Rekopane Recycling, meaning "Yes, We All Work Together Recycling". Although all reclaimers at the landfill were invited to join, many were wary of what it could actually achieve, and they did not want to contribute money or work collectively. In January 2010, the cooperative had sixty-six members. According to the Secretary of the Committee at the Landfill, the cooperative has both short- and long-term goals:

The aim of the cooperative is that we want to continue to buy the material and when time goes we want to sell our own, we want to buy our own truck, when time goes we want to buy our own bailing machine and we want to build a shelter with that profit we get. When things go well we want to open an account for each member of the cooperative so that every month there must be something.

The Chairperson added that by registering a cooperative, the reclaimers hoped they would be able to access funding from government to help cover some of these costs.

Financing their activities remains one of the cooperative's greatest challenges. Yebo Rekopane had asked each member to donate R50 so it could buy a scale. However, this money was not enough. When figuring out how to raise more funds, the cooperative borrowed ideas from the Kwaggasrand landfill. At Kwaggasrand, the then chairperson had started his own private business collecting, crushing and selling glass, something which proved to be quite profitable. At the time, no-one was collecting or buying glass at Ondestepoort. Through the Kwaggasrand connection, Yebo Rekopane contacted the glass buyer and arranged for him to provide a bin and to purchase the glass. Every member now collects glass and takes turns crushing it. The cooperative used the profit from the first sale to buy a scale and has started to buy plastic. It has employed one woman who is paid R50 per day to weigh the materials, which are then sold in bulk to a buyer. Each reclaimer is paid based on the weight of materials that he or she supplies. The cooperative has, therefore, already made significant progress in achieving its goal of cutting out the middleman. The next challenge, however, is to buy its own transport, as the cooperative has found that renting a truck to deliver the plastic to the buyer almost completely eliminates its profit. Members of the cooperative also realize they need training in financial management and need assistance in developing a business plan.

The committees at other landfills have been inspired by what they have seen at Ondestepoort, and all are now trying to form their own cooperatives. As a reclaimer from Garankuwa said,

“at the beginning we never knew that there was something we have to do called a CC [closed corporation] or cooperative, ok, so we got the light”. The reclaimers from the different landfill committees share information and ideas about how to build cooperatives at Network meetings. The reclaimers also draw on the experiences of reclaimer cooperatives from other cities, which they know about through the emerging South African National Waste Picker Network, launched in July 2009. Some of the Tshwane leadership dream of uniting cooperatives at all the landfills into a city-wide cooperative that can eliminate all of the middlemen. In the meantime, the hard work of building cooperatives at the individual dumps continues.

Sharing Information, Building Organization

As the chairperson of Ondestepoort explained, some of the most important outcomes of the Network include the sharing of information, experience and expertise:

If we are all together - Garankuwa, Kwagga, Mamelodi and Soshanguve – we will share the ideas that can make something better than what we are experiencing. For example, the one from Kwagga will have knowledge of something, he will share it with us and we will exchange ideas.

Much of this sharing happens informally. However, the reclaimers also intentionally structure the Network meetings to share information and contacts. For example, when the Hatherley Landfill hosted the Network meeting in October 2009, the committee invited the local Community Development Worker as well as representatives of the local Ward Committee and local political organizations. All of these individuals and groups had assisted the reclaimers at the Hatherley Landfill in gaining access to the dump and improving their conditions. The Chairperson of the Hatherley Committee explained the committee had invited these external groups to the meeting because “people from other dumps in Tshwane they don’t know their committees in the settlement, they don’t know their counsellors or how to meet with them. They asked me if I could organise these people so that they may be able to see them and know them”. Having heard that forming alliances had assisted the reclaimers at Hatherley, other committees were keen to learn how to forge similar relationships. In other words, the Hatherley Committee strategically used hosting the Network meeting as an opportunity to have its allies share the history of their relationship with reclaimers from across the city. One reclaimer summed up the learning processes in the Network by stating that through seeing how things are done at other dumps “we learn how to solve problems we are having in our dumps effectively”.

As noted above, the Network also proactively aids in solving problems at dumps when the landfill committee feels it needs assistance in doing so. One reclaimer from Ondestepoort explained “if there is a problem in a dump we usually call other members from other dumps like that old man of Garankuwa [the Chairperson of the Network]. Then we will sit down and talk about it and reach an agreement”. Leaders from the Network not only bring experience, but also carry authority that helps to address issues individual committees are unable to resolve.

Strength in Numbers and Common Positions

The authority the Network leaders carry comes from the fact the Network has quickly established an identity bigger than the sum of its parts. In mid-2009, delegates to the Network held discussions at their individual landfills and collectively developed a list of rules they wanted to enforce at all of the landfills. They also developed a list of demands for the municipality. At the September 2009 meeting, the Network officially adopted the rules. According to these rules, all reclaimers and all leadership structures must comply with the following tenets:

- Preserve peace and unity at the landfills
- Secure the well being of reclaimers

- Be loyal to the leaders and the reclaimers
- Co-operate with one another in mutual trust and good faith and assist and support one another
- Not direct cars, vehicles or trucks where to dispose
- Not drink or gamble at the landfills
- Respect the status, institutions, powers and functions of the leaders in the other landfills
- Not bring children to the landfills.

Dating back to the time of Andile, the landfill committees had each enforced similar rules. However, adopting these rules as a city-wide collective proved tremendously important for the Network as the action helped the Network forge a collective identity and a common basis for working together. It also clearly established that, as a Network, reclaimers are taking responsibility or how Tshwane reclaimers work on the landfills. This common purpose and identity provides an important base from which the Network can engage with the municipality on behalf of landfill reclaimers.

In September 2009, the Network also adopted this set of demands for the municipality:

- private landfills must be closed and all waste must come to municipal dumps
- municipal workers must not take recyclable and reusable materials before they enter the dump
- the municipality must buy the reclaimers nametags in recognition of their contribution to the waste management system because if reclaimers were not working at the dumps, the dumps would have been filled long ago
- the municipality must give them cameras so that they can take photos when people do incorrect things like dump medical waste
- the municipality must give them toilets as those it provides are insufficient and dirty
- the municipality must ask people recycling at big firms to go work at the dumps with the reclaimers
- the municipality must stop people from visiting the dumps as they disturb the work of the reclaimers and are often coming to see how much money the buyers have and potentially rob them.

These demands are clearly based on the understanding that Council must recognize reclaimers' contribution to the municipal waste management system. As the Network Secretary explained, one of the main objectives of the Network is "to challenge the municipality so that it can do things it is supposed to do for us".

Some of the Network representatives met with a member of the Mayoral Committee dealing with waste management in late 2009 to present the demands, but by March 2010, the Network had not received a response and was unsure of how to proceed. However, the reclaimers remained confident that building the Network would strengthen their ability to engage with the municipality. As the chairperson of the Hatherley committee said, "when we go to the government as the Tshwane district they listen to us unlike when we go there being one small group from one dump". Importantly, a number of reclaimers reported being part of the Network has reduced their fear of taking on the municipality and buyers.

6. Challenges in the Network

Despite the many gains it has made, the Network faces a number of challenges: strengthening democratic structures at the landfills; building viable, democratic cooperatives; strengthening the network; and clarifying its objectives and guiding principles.

Strengthening Democratic Structures at the Landfills

The Network is only as strong as the committees that participate. At the beginning of 2010, none of the committees had constitutions, regular elections or bank accounts. In addition, representatives did not always report back on meetings and events they had attended on behalf of the collective. Not surprisingly, some reclaimers frequently accused others of corruption and lack of accountability. Most of the committees still focused primarily on ensuring order at their respective dumps and did not have clear broader objectives and demands. Developing objectives and demands as well as strategies to achieve them through democratic processes could help strengthen organizational structures and provide purpose and focus to the work of the committees. Given that the committees already exist and play key roles at the dumps and in the Network, developing constitutions and clear, transparent and democratic processes and procedures could also help ensure the committees represent the interests of all reclaimers at the dump.

In order to be truly democratic, the committees must represent everyone working at the landfills. Although committee members claimed they have become “used to” foreigners working at the landfills and that foreigners are welcome, committees have virtually no representation of foreigners. At one landfill, the committee invites foreigners and the few South Africans who do not have identity documents to attend general meetings, but does not consider them to be part of the committee and presumably does not allow them to vote or be elected as representatives. At another landfill, some leadership argued that cooperatives should be formed on ethnic lines. According to the chairperson, “everybody trusts his nation. When you take a Tsonga you bring him to a Tswana, the Tsonga will trick me. So if we form ourselves as one group then we can work better than the Tsongas”. If the reclaimers are to successfully engage the buyers and the municipality, they will have to overcome ethnic and national divisions on their landfills.

The committees will also need to find ways to build solidarity with reclaimers working in the streets. A number of reclaimers noted that fewer materials are coming to the dumps as increasing numbers of reclaimers are collecting in the streets and directly from businesses. Landfill reclaimers are particularly concerned about reclaimers collecting materials from businesses as these are the highest quality, most valuable recyclables. One proposed solution is to demand business reclaimers come and work directly at the dump. It is, however, highly unlikely these reclaimers, some of whom started in the dumps, would agree to give up direct access to the recyclables and move to the dirtier and more dangerous conditions at the landfills. A more strategic solution may consist of the landfill committees helping organize the street and business reclaimers in their areas and bringing them into the Network. In this way, all reclaimers can develop a collective vision for how they think recycling should be done in the municipality and what their roles should be. Because the waste management department is moving towards a separation at source programme that could potentially exclude some or all reclaimers if it is not designed to take their interests into account, unity and shared vision is of increasing importance.

Building Viable, Democratic Cooperatives

The Network has realized that forming cooperatives is one important way reclaimers can increase prices and improve their position in the recycling industry. The reclaimers at Ondestepoort have made great progress in building their cooperative. However, they stated they require support

to manage their finances properly and to develop a business plan. The Network as a whole has discussed obtaining adequate assistance on several occasions, but it struggles to find ways to do so. Given there are a number of state institutions providing this kind of support and given the reclaimers have an existing relationship with Yebo Cooperative, it appears the challenge becomes to capacitate the reclaimers in learning how to access these institutions. These institutions must also find ways of being more accessible and accountable to their target groups. It will also be important for the reclaimers who support forming cooperatives to build their capacity in explaining the benefits of membership in cooperative initiatives to other reclaimers. Finally, it will be critical for the reclaimers to continue building a collective identity, a vision and demands so the work of the cooperatives is grounded within both a broader political vision and a stable organization that can unite them towards achieving a common goal.

Strengthening the Network

The Tshwane reclaimers also face challenges related to the functioning of the Network itself. Although the reclaimers at each landfill pay the transport costs for representatives to attend meetings, each time delegates go to a meeting, they miss a day of work. As one Network committee member explained, “the other thing is that we fight with our wives when we come home from the meetings and we don’t have money, because sometimes when we come back home we find that our child is sick and because we didn’t work that day we don’t have money to take the child to the doctor”. Each of the committees also reported it is often difficult to get some reclaimers, who say they have not seen enough real benefits of participating in the Network, to contribute.

Partially due to lack of resources and partially due to capacity constraints and lack of strategic vision, the Network also struggles to follow through on actions. The Network, for example, did nothing to hold the buyers and the Member of the Mayoral Committee to account when its demands were ignored. The Network still exhibits a tendency to expect people to do things on its behalf. In order to advance, the Network will need to take steps to boost its capacity to engage in strategic planning and implementation of multi-faceted campaigns in order to achieve its objectives.

It is often assumed by academics and policy makers that simply creating a space for people to engage is sufficient to ensure engagement in participatory state processes. However, the structures and processes of government can be mystifying and intimidating. The reclaimers interviewed remained confused about who to speak to in the municipality regarding different issues. The reclaimers had not heard of Integrated Developments Plans or Integrated Waste Management Plans (which all municipalities are legally required to develop) and were not aware they have the right to make inputs into municipal development plans. Increasing Network delegates’ understanding of how the municipal government and the industry work will thus be crucial in ensuring the reclaimers can take their collective programme forward.

One of the greatest challenges facing the Network remains to gain formal recognition from the municipality. The municipality accepts that the reclaimers work on the landfills and is not actively trying to displace them. Landfill caretakers are meant to meet with the committees at their sites once a month. However, these understandings have never been formalized into written policy. In the absence of an official policy, the reclaimers are vulnerable to arbitrary changes in how the city relates to them. It is also unclear what processes they can and should follow when they have problems, ideas and suggestions.

When interviewed in July 2009, the Head of Landfill Operations did not seem to be aware the Network had been formed. However, as he explained in March 2010, he thought the Network’s formation was a useful development:

We have no problem with them talking to each other and exchanging knowledge. In practice even while economic development [the LED Department] was involved they had meetings and did that...We just regulate these guys to get order and have

certain rules on the landfill site. But they work themselves...The more they organize the better it is for us. There is more order if they are more organized and we have lesser problems and we have the same standards on all the landfills. There is nothing wrong with communication.

He also stated, "if there should be similar problems [at the different landfills] then obviously they should come to the office and talk about it". However, the reclaimers reported they were encountering problems securing meetings with the Manager, other officials, and elected representatives in the Council. The challenge, therefore, resides in finding ways to formalize and regularize channels of communication and negotiation.

Clarifying the Network's Objectives and Guiding Principles

Although the Network has agreed to a set of rules at the landfill sites and to demands directed at the municipality, it has not had much in-depth discussion regarding its main long-term objectives and the principles guiding its work. If the Network is to thrive and grow, it is crucial these issues be thoroughly debated and that a shared political vision, short-term and long-term goals, as well as strategies to achieve them, be forged.

7. Conclusion

This report has explored efforts by both the municipal Council and the reclaimers in Tshwane to organize reclaimers and to improve their position in the recycling economy. The Council's initiative was a top-down project funded by DEAT. The first phase failed because it was based on an unsustainable financial model that did not acknowledge reclaimers must be compensated for removing recyclables from the waste stream and saving landfill space. The second phase failed because it was driven by companies in the waste management sector with no meaningful experience in building worker cooperatives. These companies held a vested interest in controlling the reclaimers on the landfills, thereby deriving profit from the project. The second phase was based on a shallow model of capacity building that did not focus on accompanying the reclaimers over the medium and long term so they could develop capacity to manage their own affairs. However, through securing reclaimer access to the landfills, encouraging reclaimers to form committees and create leadership forums across all the landfills, the project did lay the foundation for more autonomous organizing by the reclaimers. Although these committees were initially strongly influenced by the waste management companies running the project, they have since established their independence.

In early 2009, the landfill committees came together to form a city-side Network that is attempting to engage and negotiate with both the municipalities and buyers of recyclable materials. It has made some progress in attracting new buyers to the landfills, negotiating prices and helping reclaimers deepen their understanding of their role in the recycling economy. A number of hurdles, however, remain: strengthening democratic structures at the landfills to represent all reclaimers and address gender, racial and national hierarchies; forging alliances with street reclaimers; building viable, democratic cooperatives; deepening reclaimers' understanding of structures and processes in the municipality and the industry; clarifying the objectives and vision of the committees and the Network; and strengthening capacity for strategic planning and implementation of joint strategies. Nevertheless, by focusing on strengthening organizing at the levels of the landfills and the city, the Network is building a stronger foundation to address these hindrances and engage more effectively with the municipality and the buyers. The challenge remains to engage the municipality in negotiating more formalized relations with the Network and landfill committees, thus demonstrating its support of the reclaimers' more autonomous approach to organizing and development.

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About Inclusive Cities: The Inclusive Cities project aims to strengthen membership-based organizations (MBOs) of the working poor in the areas of organizing, policy analysis and advocacy, in order to ensure that urban informal workers have the tools necessary to make themselves heard within urban planning processes. Inclusive Cities is a collaboration between MBOs of the working poor, international alliances of MBOs and those supporting the work of MBOs. For more information visit: www.inclusivecities.org.

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About Umphilo waManzi: Umphilo waManzi is a nonprofit organization formed in 2008 with the objective of helping to improve the livelihoods of and services to poor communities through research, advocacy, liaison, and accessible communication. Its work to date has involved issues of water and sanitation, climate change, waste pickers, xenophobia, and public participation. Umphilo waManzi managed the “Visibility and Voice for Decent Work for Waste Pickers Project South Africa, 2009/2010” for WIEGO.

