

## BUILDING FROM WHAT EXISTS: INTEGRATING RECLAIMERS INTO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE RECYCLING ECONOMY

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### KEY FINDINGS

As South Africa moves forward with implementation of 'waste picker integration' it is important to draw lessons from existing experiences. This briefing note presents findings from research on initiatives to integrate reclaimers (waste pickers) in Johannesburg and Metsimaholo. A core finding is that reclaimers are already deeply integrated into municipal solid waste management systems and the recycling economy through their '*separation outside source*' (SoS) system. SoS predates government interest in recycling and is the primary way that post-consumer recyclables are collected. However, the municipalities and industry did not acknowledge SoS. In addition, the dominant 'charity model' of integration did not recognise reclaimers' expertise and assumed that reclaimers should simply participate in programmes designed by professionals and officials. As a result, projects did not meet reclaimers' core needs and some made reclaimers worse off. Officials tasked with implementing integration did so without the benefit of national policy or guidance, and identified the need for training, resources, time, and guidelines to support their work on integration. Highly informal approaches to integration undermined its success, and projects perpetuated existing power relations. Separation at source (S@S) contracts dispossessed reclaimers and worsened their incomes, working conditions, and relationships with residents. They were structural 'reclaimer dis-integration' interventions that overrode gains from small integration projects. Integration and S@S cannot be treated as distinct policy spheres and 'integrated S@S' is crucial for the success of both. Integration and S@S also cannot be imposed from above – residents adopted five different approaches to S@S and reclaimers created their own integration and S@S programmes, from which they derived the greatest benefit. Rather than integrating individual reclaimers into new S@S and recycling systems, new policies and programmes must integrate with the existing SoS system. Key starting points include valuing and paying reclaimers for their services, inverting the charity model, dedicating sufficient resources to integration, supporting reclaimers to organise, and ensuring reclaimers play a leading role in the development and implementation of integration and integrated S@S. The briefing note presents seven integration questions and an 'integration spectrum' to facilitate negotiation and agreement on core components of integration.

### INTRODUCTION

For many years, reclaimers (also known as waste pickers) were considered nuisances, and South African policy focused on eradicating them from landfills and removing them from the streets. In an important shift, the 2011 National Waste Management Strategy (DEA, 2011) committed national government to provide guidance to municipalities and business on how to improve reclaimers' conditions. In order to support the development of evidence-based guidelines, the University of the Witwatersrand's 'Lessons from Waste Picker Integration Initiatives' research project conducted in-depth analysis of integration in Johannesburg and Metsimaholo. This report presents the key findings and recommendations.

### METHODOLOGY

Five types of integration were analysed: the top-down integration and empowerment projects of the Johannesburg municipality and its Pikitup waste utility; officials' de facto integration initiatives in Metsimaholo; a

public-private partnership (PPP) between Sasol and Metsimaholo to support cooperatives; collaboration between the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA) and Packaging Council of South Africa (PACSA) in Metsimaholo to support the Ikageng-Ditamating (ID) cooperative's recycling centre and S@S service; and the African Reclaimers Organisation's (ARO) reclaimer-resident S@S service in Johannesburg. The research was conducted between June 2016 and August 2019 in sites spanning socio-economic and demographic profiles. The experiences of reclaimers, officials and residents were investigated using qualitative methods including ethnography, participatory mapping, and 370 semi-structured interviews.

### MAIN RESULTS

#### *Overlooking separation outside source (SoS)*

Discussions on waste picker integration typically assume that reclaimers perform marginal work and require support to be integrated into municipal waste

management systems and the recycling value chain. However, reclaimers began salvaging recyclables long before government entered this terrain and are already deeply integrated via their well-functioning 'separation outside source' (SoS) system.

Figure 1 presents an overview of the SoS system. Reclaimers salvage valuable materials from kerbside rubbish bins and landfills. They then sell recyclables to buyback centres, relaunching them into production, consumption, wasting, and potential recycling or reuse.



Figure 1: Separation Outside Source (Samson et al.)

SoS is central to waste minimisation and the recycling economy. For example, in 2014 reclaimers in South Africa salvaged 80-90% of post-consumer packaging and paper sold into the value chain and saved municipalities up to R750 million in landfill airspace (Godfrey et al., 2016). However, their low incomes come solely from the sale of materials. Reclaimers are not paid for their collection service, environmental contributions, diverting waste from landfill, or salvaging, preparation, transportation, and supply of materials to industry. As a result, reclaimers subsidise both municipalities and industry.

The research found that SoS and the extent of reclaimers' pivotal role in recycling were not acknowledged by national government, the municipalities, industry, or Sasol. Thus, policies and programmes were not evidence-based, which led to unanticipated challenges and negative effects elaborated below.

#### *Municipalities and officials*

Integration was a new area of work for municipalities and fell outside waste officials' areas of expertise. However, the officials had not received funding, guidance, training, or support to design and implement integration. Officials found creative ways to raise funds and support reclaimers, but faced daily challenges that they lacked knowledge, skills, capacity, authority, and/or resources to address. As integration was not part of officials' key performance indicators (or only marginally so), it was not prioritised and officials had insufficient time and resources to advance integration. One highlighted:

*When I attend conferences, all I hear when people speak is how municipalities are not participating, but they never think about what leads to those circumstances.*

Officials identified the need for national guidelines, targets, training, and funding to support their work on integration. The following analysis of municipal integration projects must be understood in this context.

#### *Municipal policy and programmes*

Each municipality's approach to integration was shaped by its size, resources, capacity, history, and contemporary context. Metsimaholo was under-resourced and faced broader challenges related to municipal governance and service delivery. It did not have integration policies or projects. However, officials created de facto initiatives to assist reclaimers and support cooperatives.

Johannesburg had adopted a 'Reclaimer Empowerment Plan' and implemented empowerment and integration projects. The relatively small number of participating reclaimers benefited through registration and receipt of training, trolleys, and support to form cooperatives.

#### *Charity model of integration*

The municipalities, Sasol, and (to a somewhat lesser extent) industry worked within a 'charity model' of integration based on implicit assumptions that:

1. reclaimers require charitable support (rather than payment for service provision);
2. reclaimers should be integrated via special projects (rather than systemic interventions);
3. reclaimers do not possess knowledge relevant to official recycling programmes;
4. reclaimers should not be involved in decision-making regarding their own integration or S@S;
5. officials and professionals should design and implement integration;
6. reclaimers should be compliant, appreciative participants in projects designed for them by others.

#### *Effects of the charity model*

The charity model had profoundly negative effects. Reclaimers felt infantilised, denigrated, and disrespected. Discrete projects with small budgets had little prospect of fostering lasting, positive changes. Key problems raised by reclaimers remained unresolved, and their proposals were not considered. Few reclaimers in Johannesburg registered due to distrust of city and Pikitup officials and lack of clear benefits.

Exclusion of reclaimers from decision-making in the municipal initiatives in Johannesburg and the PPP in Metsimaholo resulted in projects that provided inadequate equipment and did not address reclaimers' key priorities. Many reclaimers struggled to understand the training provided or see its relevance to their work. At least one pilot in Johannesburg reduced reclaimers' incomes and position in the value chain.

#### *Cooperatives*

The research identified two paradoxes regarding the role of cooperatives in integration. First, the municipalities upheld cooperatives as the only route to integration, yet the majority of reclaimers did not want to join

cooperatives. Second, although reclaimers were required to form cooperatives, the cooperatives received insufficient support. The route to integration therefore mitigated against the achievement of integration. Industry and Sasol also provided inadequate incubation. Particularly as 92% of waste cooperatives fail (Godfrey *et al.*, 2015), successful integration will require comprehensive support for cooperatives that reclaimers choose to create, as well as support for other forms of integration designed with, and endorsed by, reclaimers.

#### *Informal approach to integration*

The municipalities, industry, and Sasol exhibited a surprisingly informal approach to integration. Projects lacked detailed implementation and financial sustainability plans, written agreements with reclaimers, clear time-frames, dispute resolution procedures, and monitoring and evaluation systems. The resulting problems highlight that integration of a part of the economy considered informal cannot be treated informally. It is essential that planning, implementation, and evaluation of integration are thorough, transparent, and conducted with reclaimers as equal partners.

#### *Unequal collaborations*

The municipal, PPP, and SAWPA-PACSA projects did not address the deeply unequal power relations between reclaimers and other parties rooted in race, class, and occupation. As a result, these inequalities became further entrenched, directly undermining integration and precluding meaningful partnerships. Explicit transformation of power relations is central to integration. Integration and equitable collaboration between reclaimers and other parties also require providing reclaimers with resources to organise, meet, strengthen their organisations, deepen their knowledge and skills, and secure expert support.

#### *Disregarding occupation and place in the sector*

Both municipalities prioritised unemployed community members with no history in the sector over reclaimers for inclusion in recycling and S@S projects. Analysis of SoS in policy and project development would have identified reclaimers' existing jobs and legitimate claims to continue to work and benefit from innovations, as well as how the proposed projects compromised and eliminated reclaimers' self-created green jobs. Evidence-based policy requires consideration of SoS in the development of new interventions in order to ensure that existing jobs are protected and improved and are not eliminated to create new jobs for other people.

#### *Race, gender and nationality*

As elsewhere in the country, virtually all reclaimers were African and racism permeated their daily interactions with residents, buyback centres, and other parties. This was compounded by discrimination against the poor and people who work with waste. Integration requires explicitly addressing racism and its intersections with class and other forms of exploitation and oppression.

Women reclaimers confronted a range of gender-based challenges, including greater risk of theft and violence, monopolisation of high-value materials by men, and greater indignities and health hazards due to lack of ablution facilities. These were neither identified nor addressed in integration initiatives, precluding the possibility of women's full integration. The research affirmed the need to pay attention to gender issues in the development and implementation of policies and programmes on integration, S@S, and recycling.

Cross-border reclaimers comprised a significant percentage of reclaimers in Johannesburg. Although initially registered by the municipality, by 2019 they were excluded from all programmes. This did not reduce their numbers, but meant that Pikitup did not have accurate data on reclaimers working in the city, which undermined successful implementation of projects. Cross-border reclaimers made, and continue to make, crucial contributions. Evidence-based policy on cross-border reclaimers is necessary. As in other sectors, ways to regularise their status should be developed, particularly as reclaiming is a non-excludable occupation.

#### *Separation at source and reclaimer dis-integration*

S@S emerged as the key factor in integration. Figure 2 depicts the effects of S@S provided by private companies without consideration of SoS, as in Johannesburg.

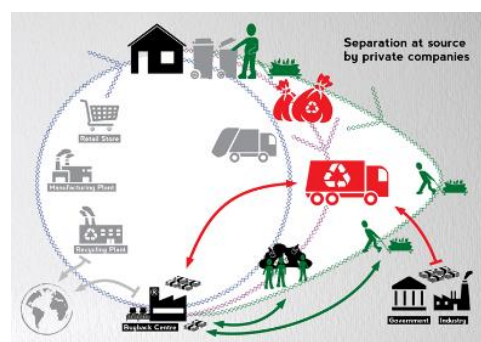


Figure 2: Official separation at source (Samson *et al.*)

The S@S system is depicted in red and the SoS system in green. Households separate recyclables for collection by the company's trucks. Like reclaimers, the company generates income by selling the materials to buyback centres (or directly to recyclers). In addition, it is paid a service fee by government or industry (in this case Pikitup). SoS and reclaimers are pushed to the margins.

In order to survive, street reclaimers in Johannesburg continued to salvage recyclables from rubbish bins. Some also extracted items from the bags of separated materials. However, there were fewer materials to collect and some residents and security guards blocked reclaimers' access to recyclables. S@S resulted in significant deteriorations in reclaimers' incomes, working conditions, role in the recycling economy, and relationships with residents and the municipality. One reclaimer explained:

*We started recycling way back in the mid-nineties....The problem is the municipality that wants to snatch the food out of our mouths.*

S@S dispossessed reclaimers and was a systemic 'reclaimer dis-integration' programme that overrode benefits of integration and empowerment projects.

S@S by community cooperatives had the same disintegrating effect. To a lesser extent, so too did S@S by reclaimer cooperatives that did not include local street reclaimers. Solidarity action by Ikageng-Ditamating in Metsimaholo to mitigate these effects highlighted the importance of assessing implications of initiatives for all reclaimers at the outset, including all relevant reclaimers, and negotiating compensation packages where necessary. This includes landfill reclaimers, whose supply of materials dwindles as the efficacy of S@S increases.

Failure to factor SoS into the planning of S@S also negatively affected contracted companies and cooperatives, as they collected and sold fewer materials than anticipated. In addition, Pikitup paid companies the per household service fee even when reclaimers had collected the materials or residents had not separated recyclables for collection.

#### *Integrated S@S*

The research therefore established that S@S and integration are inherently intertwined and cannot be treated as separate policy spheres. Successful integration and S@S both require 'integrated S@S' that is negotiated with reclaimers, includes them as equals in planning and oversight, builds on the strengths of SoS, and pays reclaimers for service provision. By starting from what exists, integrated S@S will be locally appropriate, foster integration instead of dis-integration, and generate data to be used in the further development of integrated S@S.

#### *Contesting, negotiating, and forging integration*

Despite their exclusion from decision-making by the municipalities, reclaimers in both municipalities actively shaped integration and S@S. They organised against and contested initiatives that harmed them, demanded inclusion as equal partners in decision-making and negotiations, and implemented their own visions of integration and S@S by establishing partnerships with residents, companies, and industry associations.

Reclaimers benefitted from the projects they initiated in several ways. Within three years, two-thirds of households separated their materials for ID in Metsimaholo. ID and ARO members participating in their respective projects gained better access to cleaner materials, secured improved working conditions, developed stronger relationships with residents that transformed how they were seen, developed working relationships with industry, and deepened their organisational capacities.

Despite challenges encountered, reclaimers derived the greatest benefit from these projects, emphasising the importance of reclaimer leadership in all phases of integration and integrated S@S, as well as the need to pilot and implement reclaimers' integration proposals.

#### *Reclaimer organising*

Reclaimers were only able to create integrated S@S services because they had formed democratic organisations through which they could develop positions and proposals and mobilise and negotiate to achieve them. As in other countries, democratic reclaimer organisations are fundamental to reclaimer integration. Rather than waiting for organisations to emerge in opposition to exclusionary policies, government and industry support for reclaimers to organize themselves must be a key component of integration.

#### *Residents forged integration and S@S*

Residents are typically seen as passive recipients of S@S programmes who simply decide whether to participate. However, residents living in areas with S@S programmes actively forged S@S and integration on the ground through decisions about what to do with their recyclables. Residents fell into five categories: wasters (who did not see the value in recycling); agnostics (who were indifferent regarding whether their recyclables were collected or by whom); enforcers (who prevented reclaimers from accessing recyclables); reclaimer integrators (who gave their materials to reclaimers and worked with reclaimers to create alternative S@S programmes); and competitors (who supplemented their own low incomes by selling recyclables). Residents' positions were linked to their own material conditions and their perspectives on broader social, political, economic, and development issues. One resident who gave her separated materials to reclaimers explained:

*we have reclaimers in this community and I know that they are working to support their families ... I will never separate for Pikitup because they already have money.*

These findings highlight that residents cannot be forced to accept municipal approaches to S@S and should be meaningfully engaged about the forms that S@S can take. These engagements should include reclaimers and information about who they are and their contributions so that residents can develop informed positions.

#### *Industry integration*

Reclaimer integration includes integration into the value chain as well as the municipal solid waste management service (Scheinberg, 2012). Reclaimers sought higher and more stable prices for materials, as well as payment for extracting the materials from waste and providing them to industry. Integration was also understood to include transformation of the industry to address racial hierarchies and support reclaimers to collectively reach the upper tiers of the value chain.



### *The integration spectrum*

Conflicts related to integration and S@S emerged as the parties had profoundly different answers to seven core integration questions: Who/what is being integrated into what, why, how, when, by whom, and in whose interest? The research found that while decisions about integration and S@S seem technical, they are highly political as they concern issues of power, governance, survival, exploitation, and social, economic and political transformation. Based on the research findings, Table 1 presents an 'integration spectrum' that sets out a range of positions on key aspects of integration that should be discussed, negotiated, and agreed by all parties to provide a solid foundation for the development of policy and programmes.

### CONCLUSIONS

Integration requires inversion of the charity model and the development of a new approach rooted in: respect for reclaimers; commitment that recycling and S@S will not dispossess reclaimers and will improve their incomes and conditions; acknowledgement of, and payment for reclaimers' services and contributions; and recognition that reclaimers are experts on municipal recycling and need to play a leading role in defining, planning, and implementing reclaimer integration, recycling and S@S.

Integration is not about creating special projects to bring poor, marginal reclaimers into recycling and municipal waste management systems; it is about integrating reclaimers and SoS into how we understand and intervene in these systems.

The assumption that integration, S@S, and recycling policies and programmes can be designed as if working on a clean slate is pervasive. However, this briefing note establishes that evidence-based policy and programmes must be rooted in holistic analysis of the entire waste management system and recycling economy without creating false divisions between parts of the economy considered formal and informal. Such analysis affirms that locally appropriate, effective, and just systems to revalorise recyclables must build from SoS.

Integration provides a method to see, think, plan, and act differently based on current realities rather than abstract models developed elsewhere. Although this research focused on reclaimers and recycling, the evidence-based integration approach could unlock new ways of

understanding and addressing other social, political, economic, and environmental issues.

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A copy of the full research report is available at: <https://wasteroadmap.co.za/completed-projects/evidence-based-guidelines-to-integrate-waste-pickers/>

**Disclaimer:** The content and views included in this Briefing Note are based on independent analysis and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Department of Science and Innovation or the CSIR.

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Table 1 – Integration Spectrum

Position	← Aspect of integration →	Position
Marginal, need help	<b>How reclaimers are seen</b>	Knowledgeable experts, make important contributions
Not acknowledged	<b>Position on SoS</b>	Foundation for integration & S@S
No claim, preference for unemployed community members	<b>Claim to work in the sector</b>	Right to continue working in the sector + first opportunities
Individual reclaimers	<b>Who/what is being integrated</b>	Reclaimers, their organisations, SoS
Municipal solid waste management (MSWM) system	<b>Integrated with what</b>	Transformed MSWM system, value chain, society, environment
Reclaimers into MSWM	<b>Direction of integration</b>	Official S@S and recycling based on and integrated with SoS
Coops	<b>Modality of integration</b>	Coops, individuals, other relevant modalities
Discrete, S@S prioritised	<b>Relationship of S@S &amp; integration</b>	Inherently connected, addressed together
Reclaimers provide free collection service	<b>Exploitation</b>	Reclaimers paid for service & receive benefits
Assumption that reclaimers benefit from any initiative	<b>Who benefits</b>	Reclaimers improved income, benefits, conditions & status (+ municipalities save landfill space and meet social and economic goals; industry EPR + steady flow of materials; society)
Collectors (possibly BBC)	<b>Position in value chain</b>	All levels of a transformed industry
Reclaimers treated as homogeneous	<b>Difference and inequalities between reclaimers</b>	Differences based on gender, nationality, location etc identified and addressed so all are integrated
Expected to sort recyclables and participate in S@S	<b>Role of residents</b>	Actively involved in integration
Top-down provision of charity support	<b>Power and control over integration</b>	Participatory, negotiated and driven by reclaimers
Initiatives are ad hoc and informal	<b>Institutionalisation</b>	Included in laws, polices, Plans (IDP, IMWP etc.) bylaws, EPR etc.
Work related interventions (tools etc.)	<b>Spheres of integration</b>	Political, legal, social, cultural, financial and institutional spheres
None	<b>Funding</b>	EPR (+ government and donors)
None	<b>Timeline</b>	Clear targets and time-frames
None - not considered related to integration	<b>Organising</b>	Support for autonomous, democratic organising central to integration
Produce recyclables so reclaimers keep jobs	<b>Relation to environment</b>	Reclaimers forge and are integrated into a just, de-growth economy
Integration of work into MSWM system	<b>Objective and extent of integration</b>	Just and emancipatory transformation of social, political, economic, environmental, and cultural spheres