



Baseline Report

Creating a just framework for reclamer integration in Mpumalanga's Gert Sibande District Municipality

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1. Introduction

South Africa's informal waste pickers (IWPs), also known as reclaimers, are crucial actors within the country's municipal solid waste management (SWM) systems. Through the labour of reclaimers, who collect recyclable materials from businesses at kerbside and on landfills, South Africa boasts recycling rates for certain recyclable waste fractions (metals, cardboard, PET, etc.) comparable to those in European countries (Godfrey et al., 2016). By diverting recyclables out of the municipal SWM system, reclaimers have saved South African cities an estimated R750 million annually in collection and landfill airspace costs (Godfrey et al., 2016). This work also contributes to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from South Africa's waste sector, decreases demand for non-renewable raw materials and, in a country facing an acute unemployment crisis, supports more than 100,000 livelihoods nationwide (Samson, 2020; Samson et al., 2022).

Yet, despite their essential role in the country's recycling economy, reclaimers have been historically denied acknowledgement as legitimate actors within the South African waste and recycling sectors. Under de-integrating waste management policy, they have been systematically delegitimised: treated as competition or even criminals by the state and stigmatised by the communities that they work within (Aparcana, 2017). Thus, for example, only an estimated 10% of households separate their waste within South African urban communities because formal recycling mechanisms are either limited or absent (Stats SA, 2018).

In contrast to the delegitimisation of informal recyclers, their equitable integration into formal SWM systems has successfully legitimised their work. Globally, waste picker integration has been driven through supportive public policy, by enshrining reclaimers' right to work through the legal classification of their occupation, as in Brazil (Curry, 2018; Ricardo, 2021), and Colombia (Bermudez et al., 2019; Rateau & Tovar, 2019), or by simply legalising reclaiming activities (Medina, 2008). The *Waste Picker Integration Guideline for South Africa* (DEFF & DSI, 2020), developed through a three-year participatory process, defines what waste picker integration means in South Africa, sets out ten waste picker integration principles to underpin all integration initiatives, and provides detailed guidance to municipalities and industry on how to partner with reclaimers to develop formally planned recycling collection systems. These systems build on and strengthen the existing work of reclaimers in order to improve their incomes and conditions while simultaneously increasing recycling rates. The 2020 *National Waste Management Strategy* requires all municipalities to integrate reclaimers in line with the *Guideline*. As such, waste picker integration is now of national importance. This nationally mandated integration into formal SWM systems has given legitimacy to reclaimers and their organisations through partnerships with the public sector.

In South Africa and around the world, these partnerships have given reclaimers secure access to recyclables (Curry, 2018; Dias, 2012; Luthra & Monteith, 2021; Ricardo, 2021), improved

working conditions (de Bercegol & Gowda, 2018), secured greater participation by the informal sector in recycling markets (Rosaldo, 2018), and combatted stigma (Forment, 2018; Sholanke & Gutberlet, 2021). Moreover, the additional compensation of reclaimers through remuneration for their services underscores the value of waste and recycling work (Gutberlet & Baeder, 2008; Mumuni, 2016; Ricardo, 2021; Samson, 2010; Tremblay, 2013) and the latter's contribution to providing secure, stable incomes (Dias, 2016; Rosaldo, 2019). Even without the support of the state, ground-up reclaimer-driven integration has delivered positive results. In lieu of public sector support, reclaimers have sought integration and legitimisation through partnerships with capital (Martinez, 2012) and social civil integration initiatives, including political activism and participation in neighbourhood assemblies (Forment, 2018), social use of the law (Samson, 2017) and quotidian horizontal civility and trust-building (Forment, 2018; Ortuzar, 2019).

However, most reclaimer 'success stories' have been in cities where, through organisation and various forms of integration or inclusion, reclaimers have been effectively integrated into formal municipal SWM systems. There is, therefore, urgent need to support and advance waste picker integration outside South Africa's metro areas, in local and district municipalities where there are substantial opportunities for recycling work but few resources to facilitate integration into the SWM system.

This report, produced as an output for the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ)-funded project "Creating a just framework for reclaimer integration in Mpumalanga's Gert Sibande District Municipality", is a response to this imperative. The project has sought to develop a framework for integration in a rural district municipality, using the Gert Sibande District Municipality (GSDM) as a case study for three reasons: 1) the District's mix of peri-urban and rural communities speaks to the current implementation gap for waste picker integration; 2) the African Reclaimer's Organisation (ARO), one of the two main mass-based democratic reclaimer (waste picker) organisations in South Africa, had already forged connections within the District, raised significant funds for integration in the GSDM, and begun fledgling integration projects there that they would like to be incorporated into a broader, District-wide integration framework; and 3) initial engagement by the project team with key stakeholders within the municipality suggested a willingness to cooperate with the research agenda and an eagerness within municipal leadership to adopt a just integration framework.

The project included three key outputs: 1) a baseline research report on reclaimers and reclaimer integration in the GSDM based on a reclaimer survey, key informant interviews and documentary analysis; 2) a workshop with key stakeholders in the GSDM to report on the baseline research findings, receive stakeholder feedback on the baseline research, and receive stakeholder input into the draft framework; and 3) a draft framework to guide the approach to reclaimer integration in the GSDM. This baseline report constitutes the first output, including revisions and additional lessons gleaned during the stakeholder workshop which was held in Ermelo in July 2025. The report is divided into 10 sections: 1) introduction; 2) a brief review of literature on reclaimers and

claimer integration; 3) the research design and methodology; 4) the state of waste management and recycling in the GSDM; 5) Gert Sibande's Integration landscape; 6) a snapshot of reclaimers and reclaimer activity based on the survey data; 7) conclusions and recommendations; 8) references; and 9) appendices, including a table providing an overview of the survey sample and a voice of reclaimers word cloud.

2. Reclaimers and Reclaimer Integration

Scheinberg and Savain (2015) note that the relationship between formal state-sponsored waste (and recycling) services, and the informal sector has been frequently defined by mistrust and competition. In cities across the globe, reclaimers' right to the city has come under increasing threat, with reclaimers often viewed by planners, investors politicians, and state policies and institutions as de-legitimised participants in an otherwise ideal type solid waste management system (Tremblay, 2013; Luthra, 2020; Sentime, 2014).

The perception of informal sector activities can vary depending on the city: some countries have policies that stigmatise reclaiming while others, like South Africa, have made significant strides in creating an empowering and enabling policy environment for reclaimers. In most countries, however, reclaimers are not recognised as workers. Consequently, their right to work is not legally protected (Aparcana, 2017; Lubaale & Nyang'oro, 2013). This lack of formal recognition has restricted access to public waste management and recycling decision-making processes and, consequently, heightened vulnerabilities, reinforced perceptions of reclaimers as illegitimate, informal and unreliable (Adama, 2012; Ravindra et al., 2016; Thakur et al., 2018; Xulu, 2019). This ultimately limits their ability to legitimately participate in the economic activity of resource recovery (Granados & Rosli, 2018). A lack of supportive infrastructure, including workspace, forces reclaimers' work into the streets, reinforcing their image as 'backward' and limiting their ability to compete with new, state-sponsored actors (Dias & Ogando, 2015; Ferreira, 2016).

Similarly, within neoliberal formations of the city and renewal or urbanisation processes, reclaimers have often been posited as counterpoints or incompatibilities (Elliott, 2019). Municipal authorities across the globe have labelled informal recycling as a threat to clean public spaces in modern cities, which in turn has threatened reclaimers' right to the city (Parizeau, 2015). For instance, Parizeau (2015) describes how repressive municipal policies in Buenos Aires have been utilised by authorities to exclude reclaimers from public space by seeking to redefine the legitimate uses and users of public space (Parizeau, 2011). This has been observed to occur through securitisation (closed spaces, locked bins, etc.) (see Fernandez, 2020; Parizeau, 2017) or by sectioning off areas of cities, typically where wealthy residents reside, as off limits to reclaimers through privatised services enforced by policing or through the criminalisation of informal waste collection (Anantharaman, 2021; Rendon et al., 2021; Valenzuela-Levi, 2020). This occurs legally,

through exclusionary policy and bylaws (Forment, 2018; Wittmer & Parizeau, 2016), but most commonly through quotidian acts of scorn and discrimination. Unlike formal municipal waste and recycling workers, in most contexts, who possess the aesthetics of legitimacy (personal protective equipment, uniforms, identifying material), reclaimers lack these aesthetics of perceived formality (Shankar & Sahni, 2017) and are frequently stigmatised for their appearance and supposed vulnerability (Bermudez et al., 2019; Elliott, 2019; Porras & Sanjuan, 2018; Nemadire et al., 2017; O'Hare, 2019, 2019; Perez, 2016).

This marginalisation has occurred through, large-scale, top-down approaches to systems implementation (Jayasinghe et al., 2019), through restrictive licensing or permitting processes which limit informal actors' ability to interact with waste markets (Dinler, 2016), and through privatisation processes, which work to the exclusion of reclaimers who already perform waste management services informally (Baud et al., 2001; Cavé, 2014; Medina, 2000; Samson, 2009; Shankar & Sahni, 2018). As a result, reclaimers have been increasingly dispossessed from traditional sources of recyclables by new, de-integrating, privatised or mechanised municipal waste collection systems which prioritise channeling recyclables into closed systems (Dias, 2012; Hartmann, 2018; Curry, 2018; Demaria & Schindler, 2016; Kornberg, 2020; Sing, 2018; Wittmer, 2020). In South African cities, like Johannesburg and Durban, municipal separation at source (S@S) programmes have excluded and deintegrated reclaimers (Dladla, 2018; Kadyamadare, 2017; Maema, 2017; Mahlodi, 2017; Pholoto, 2016; Rubin et al., 2020; Samson, 2020a, 2020c; Samson et al., 2022; Shogole, 2019), contributing to dispossession (Samson, 2011) or harassment from municipal authorities (Ferreira, 2016).

Despite quotidian acts of neoliberal dispossession, discrimination and stigmatisation, reclaiming persists, and often thrives as an essential solid waste management and recycling service in cities across the globe. Despite being denied legitimacy as essential workers; a survey of contemporary literature suggests that reclaimers have been reclaiming legitimacy through a variety tactics. The most fruitful have included: the integration of informal recyclers into formal SWM systems, the organisation and cooperatisation of workers, and reclaimers directly challenging their illegitimate status on the streets and within their own communities.

In various contexts, equitable reclainer-led integration into formal SWM systems has proven effective in legitimising their work through supportive public policies that recognise reclaimers' right to work, either by legally classifying their occupation, in the case of Brazil (Curry, 2018; Ricardo, 2021) and Colombia (Bermudez et al., 2019; Rateau & Tovar, 2019a) or by legalising waste picking outright (Medina, 2008). Nationally mandated integration into formal SWM systems has further enhanced the legitimacy of reclaimers and their organisations by fostering public-sector partnerships that enable access by reclaimers to recyclables (Curry, 2018; Dias, 2012; Luthra & Monteith, 2021; Ricardo, 2021), improve working conditions (de Bercegol & Gowda, 2018), increase informal sector participation in waste and recycling markets (Rosaldo, 2018), and reduce stigma (Forment, 2018; Sholanke & Gutberlet, 2021). Additionally, providing reclaimers with

remuneration for their services not only affirms the essential nature of their labour (Gutberlet & Baeder, 2008; Mumuni, 2016; Ricardo, 2021; Samson, 2010; Tremblay, 2013), but also contributes to more secure and stable livelihoods (Dias, 2016; Rosaldo, 2019).

However, as discussed above, the support of the state is not the only driver of integration and livelihoods. Reclaimer-driven integration, in lieu of public sector support, has delivered positive results through partnerships with capital (Martinez, 2012) and social civil integration. These bottom-up initiatives include political activism and participation in neighbourhood assemblies (Forment, 2018), social use of the law (Samson, 2017), and quotidian horizontal civility and trust-building (Forment, 2018; Ortuzar, 2019). By implication, the effective neighbourhood integration of reclaimers as established and recognised waste service providers for some communities have been shown to generate positive outcomes. These include transforming stigma to trust by demonstrating the reliability of reclaimers as service providers (Forment, 2018; Ogando et al., 2017), helping reclaimers to resist dispossession by state or private actors (Kornberg, 2020), and securing access to recyclables and facilitating collection (Demaria & Schindler, 2016; Forment, 2018; Ogando et al., 2017) through supportive infrastructure such as storage (Hayoun, 2021), workspace (Ferreira, 2016) or specially-provided bins (Sholanke & Gutberlet, 2021). Yet, even though policy-driven or bottom-up reclaimer integration initiatives have generally been shown to have had legitimising outcomes for workers, top-down integration processes have lacked reclaimers' epistemic participation. The implications of the latter approach have been shown to be delegitimising and de-integrating, with negative outcomes for workers (Rateau & Tovar, 2019b; Sternberg, 2013) in metropolitan cities, including Johannesburg (Samson, 2020c; Samson et al., 2022; Sekhwela & Samson, 2020).

Ground-up campaigns have therefore been central to securing reclaimers' right to the city. As Dias (2016: 3) writes, "waste pickers across the world are increasingly demanding voice, visibility, and validity." For most informal reclaimers, the first step towards securing this right is organisation. This has occurred at several levels. Internationally, organisations such as Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and the International Alliance of Waste Pickers (IAWP) have supported policy transformation, and brought reclaimer organisations from countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa into networking processes (Bonner & Carré, 2013; Bonner & Spooner, 2011a, 2011b; Ciplet, 2019). National networks of reclaimers, such as the Alliance of Indian Waste Pickers (AIW) and the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA) have fought for the social recognition and citizenship rights of reclaimers (Bonner & Spooner, 2011a, 2011b; Dias, 2012; Ricardo, 2021). However, the most transformational movements towards legitimisation have occurred on the ground, in various cities across the Global South, where the unionisation or cooperatisation of waste pickers, has been effective in advancing and securing their rights. As Martinez (2012: 159) observes, the unionisation and cooperatisation of waste pickers has transformed workers from independent, self-employed reclaimers who "eked out a livelihood in the cities' landfills and streets into recyclers who belong to a formal, legal

association, who lobby aggressively and tirelessly for government legislation and social inclusion policies, and who can participate as equal partners in solid waste management projects.”

A myriad of benefits emerging from the cooperatisation of workers have been observed, not the least the economic empowerment of organised pickers, who have benefited from increased bargaining power with other waste actors in seeking recognition from the state (Dias, 2016; Miranda et al., 2020; Ntuli, 2019) of their recycling work *as work*, gaining social acceptance for members within communities (Failor, 2010; Gutberlet et al., 2017; Mamphitha, 2011; Medina, 2000; Sing, 2018), and securing access to waste and recyclables (Shankar & Sahni, 2018; Skinner & Watson, 2020). Moreover, reclaimer organisations have been observed to fulfil a number of vital social, political and cultural functions (Dias & Samson, 2016). For instance, cooperatives have enabled collectors to engage the state over improved working conditions and welfare rights (Binion & Gutberlet, 2012; Ezeah et al., 2013; Ricardo, 2021; Rosaldo, 2019; Samson, 2015; Tremblay, 2013), or given reclaimers a unified voice to resist privatisation and de-integrating waste management policy (Chikarmane, 2012; Dias, 2012; Medina, 2008; Samson, 2009). The overall outcome of organisation and collective action has been the reclamation of reclaimers' dignity within their work (Kabeer et al., 2013; Medina, 2000), reducing the stigma attached to informal recycling and waste work (Dinler, 2016; Zapata Campos et al., 2021) and improving the social status of reclaimers (Colombijn & Morbidini, 2017). Yet, the cooperatisation and unionisation of reclaimers is not an easy or straightforward process (see Samson, 2010). Cooperatisation is not necessarily a silver bullet for improving livelihoods; economic gains do not always accompany organisation; and stigma persists despite cooperatisation. Nonetheless, as Rosaldo (2016) argues, the gains that have been made through cooperatisation suggests that working in cohorts allows reclaimers to tap into reservoirs of power not usually accorded to the informal sector within the neoliberal city.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to develop a baseline assessment of reclaimer activity and waste picker integration in Gert Sibande District Municipality. The design of methods aligned with the seven steps outlined in the national Waste Picker Integration Guideline, aimed at informing a practical implementation framework for the district.

Data collection, between May and July 2025, involved three primary components: stakeholder interviews, a reclaimer survey, and a review of municipal documents. A total of ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders across the recycling value chain. These included four interviews with municipal officials responsible for waste and environmental management; two with representatives of Producer Responsibility Organisations (PROs) active in the region; two with representatives of the South African Waste Picker Association (SAWPA) and the African

Reclaimers Organisation (ARO); and two debrief interviews with fieldworkers who assisted in administering the reclamer survey.

In parallel, a structured survey was conducted with 324 reclaimers working across all known sites of informal recycling activity in the district. While the survey was primarily composed of close-ended questions, it also included several open-ended inquiries designed to capture qualitative insights. The survey was hosted on Kobo Toolbox and administered by two reclaimers trained as fieldworkers using tablets. Fieldworkers received formal training on the survey instrument and digital platform prior to fieldwork. The survey was made available to respondents in both English and isiZulu, with isiZulu being the first language of the majority. It was also understood by siSwati-speaking participants, who represented the second-largest language group in the sample.

Survey sites were identified through an initial scoping visit by the research team and consultations with municipal officials, ARO and SAWPA. Sampling targets were set based on estimated levels of reclamer activity at each site, with a district-wide goal of sampling approximately 30% of active reclaimers and a gender target of 70% female respondents to reflect the estimated gender composition of the reclamer labour force in the district. Fieldworkers adapted targets in the field based on on-the-ground realities, and new sites were incorporated through snowball sampling as additional reclamer activity was identified during implementation.

A review of secondary documentation was also undertaken to assess the regulatory and institutional landscape. This review included analysis of municipal bylaws, policy documents, and specifically the Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Integrated Waste Management Plans (IWMPs) of each of the seven local municipalities within Gert Sibande District.

Quantitative data from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations and correlation tests. Statistical analysis was conducted using spreadsheet tools, R, and Python-based statistical libraries, with all outputs reviewed and verified by the research team. Qualitative data from stakeholder interviews and open-ended survey responses were analysed thematically. Transcripts were coded using Taguette, an open-source qualitative data analysis tool, to identify recurring themes related to waste picker integration, institutional engagement and policy support.

3.1. Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants and received ethical clearance from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (clearance number: REC-01-830-2024). Participants were purposively selected based on their knowledge of recycling activities within the GSDM. Two categories of participants were involved: reclaimers who were approached to complete the

claimer baseline survey and key stakeholders who were interviewed on their knowledge of waste management, recycling and reclaimer integration within the district. All participants were informed of their rights, including the right to refuse participation or to withdraw at any stage without consequence. For survey participants, an information letter and consent form were read aloud before the survey commenced. Participation was strictly voluntary, and informed consent was a prerequisite for proceeding. Only individuals who provided consent within the Kobo form after hearing the full explanation were included in the study. For interview subjects, a copy of the information letter was provided prior to the interview. Informed consent was obtained either in writing, via a signed consent form, or verbally, in which case the contents of the information letter were read aloud and verbal consent was documented directly on the interview transcript.

All interview responses were anonymised during transcription and analysis. Data were collected through surveys and semi-structured interviews, with interviews recorded (where permitted) and supplemented by written notes. All data is securely stored on password-protected systems and will be retained for a period of 10 years in line with institutional data management policies, after which they will be permanently deleted. No risks or costs were associated with participation, and no compensation was provided.

3.2. Limitations

The intention of the survey was to collect reclaimers' voices at all of the sites within Gert Sibande where they work. During the data collection process, additional sites were added as additional reclaimer communities were identified. However, at the end of the data collection additional potential sites had emerged which we no longer had the time or resources to include.

The researchers faced limitations in securing interviews with all relevant municipal officials—particularly at the local municipality level—which may mean that some institutional perspectives, operational constraints and integration initiatives were under-represented. In addition, as obtaining the most recent versions of Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Integrated Waste Management Plans (IWMPs) from municipal officials proved challenging, the documentary analysis is based on analysis of plans publicly available on municipal websites. At the July stakeholder workshop, municipal officials shared that new IWMPs are currently under review. As a result, parts of the document analysis may rely on outdated or incomplete policy texts, potentially constraining the accuracy of our assessment of current regulatory readiness.

4. State of Waste Management and Recycling in Gert Sibande

Reclaimers play an essential, though often unacknowledged, role in municipal waste management and recycling systems. Changes to municipal waste systems invariably affect approaches to reclaimers and integration efforts which in turn reshape waste management practices. A clear understanding of current waste management and recycling conditions across the district's local municipalities must therefore ground any framework for reclaimer integration within the Gert Sibande District Municipality (GSDM).

The information presented here is drawn from five currently available Integrated Waste Management Plans (IWMPs) and two Integrated Development Plans (IDPs). These include IWMPs from Msukaligwa (2022–2027), Dipaleseng (2023–2028), Mkhondo (2023–2027), Lekwa (2022–2027), and Govan Mbeki (undated, but assumed to cover 2022–2027). IWMPs for Chief Albert Luthuli and Dr Pixley Ka Isaka Seme municipalities could not be sourced. The available IDPs include those of Chief Albert Luthuli (2022–2027) and Dr Pixley Ka Isaka Seme (2024–2027). It should be noted that some of the data in these documents are not current, dating back to 2016, and that the content and format varied between municipalities. For improved consistency and comparability, it is recommended that the District develop a standardised reporting framework for IWMPs and IDPs.

4.1. Management of Landfill Sites and Transfer Stations

There are 22 landfill sites and transfer stations throughout the GSDM which appear to be licensed—though in some cases licenses have expired. Despite this, none of the facilities are currently compliant with the terms of their licenses. Some sites are reported to be at capacity and in need of closure, but no funding has been allocated for proper closure procedures required by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE).

Participants in the July 2025 workshop noted that while none of the current landfill licenses permit reclaiming, reclaimers are active across all landfill sites. There was broad agreement on the need to revise these licenses to allow reclaiming under safe and regulated conditions.

Reclaimer participants in the workshop expressed a preference for working at landfill sites, citing the ability to avoid negative interactions with residents more common during kerbside collection. However, many landfill sites lack basic infrastructure such as weighbridges. Where weighbridges do exist, they are often non-functional. As a result, reported waste volumes are generally based on estimates.

Despite challenging conditions—including dust, odours, pests and the absence of ablution facilities, water, and shelter—reclaimers continue to work at these sites. Some municipalities, including Dipaleseng and Lekwa, attribute landfill burning and illegal dumping outside landfill boundaries to reclaimers, alleging that they stop vehicles before they enter the site, resulting in drivers dumping waste at the roadside.

4.2. Household Waste Collection

Household waste collection rates across the district range from 24% to 70%, with generally good service coverage in formal areas (see Table 1). However, all municipalities report difficulties servicing informal settlements where compactor trucks cannot navigate narrow or ungraded roads. Skip bins are used in some informal areas to mitigate barriers to access. High densities of backyard dwellings further complicate service delivery in several municipalities.

Additional challenges to effective waste collection include staff shortages (Govan Mbeki Municipality, for example, reported 23 vacancies), insufficient budgets and a lack of functioning vehicles in the municipal "yellow fleet." Some municipalities also cited inadequate staff skills as a barrier to effective service delivery.

During the July 2025 workshop, participants noted that waste managers typically lacked training in how to engage with communities or with reclaimers, and were not equipped to facilitate reclaimer integration in municipal systems.

Table 1: Service delivery in the 7 municipalities of GSDM¹

Municipality	Serviced households	Unserviced household	Reasons for non-collection
Msukaligwa 51089 household	35324 (70%)	15765 (30%) 11236 indigent households not serviced	Inaccessibility and bad road conditions in informal areas and vast rural areas.
Dipaleseng 12367 households	11902	2973	Poor and inaccessible roads and lack of infrastructure in

¹ Please note that the figures presented in the table are how they were indicated in the integrated Waste Management Plans (IWMPs) and/or Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) of the respective local municipalities. There is a lack of standardised reporting in these documents.

			informal areas.
Mkhondo 58504 Households	31051 (53%)	6539 (47%)	Large number of rural areas.
Lekwa N/A	30518	6816	3540 backyards 9350 informal areas. Traditional houses 1049. High number of informal areas accessibility. Lack of revenue. generation in these areas.
Govan Mbeki 108 894 (2016)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Chief Albert luthuli 53,480 households	12909 (24%)	7360 no removal 33922 households using own dumps	No proper waste removal in place. Inadequate tools and equipment. Financial constraints.
Dr Pixley Ka Isaka Seme 32972 households	23498	1720 6214 own refuse dump	Budgetry constraints. Vacant posts. Aged Fleets. Mushrooming informal houses and settlements. Non-adherence to collection schedules.

4.3. Waste Minimisation and Recycling

Waste minimisation and recycling activities reported in the IWMPs and IDPs vary widely across the following areas:

- **Msukaligwa:** Reports around 60 recycling initiatives led by private sector actors and small-scale street collectors. While details are limited, these efforts are linked to local education and awareness campaigns. There are three private recycling facilities in the municipality.
- **Dipaleseng:** Notes uncontrolled reclaiming and frequent burning at the Grootvlei landfill. No formal waste minimisation activities are currently in place, though future plans include separation at source, a buy-back centre and education programmes. A few privately owned buy-back centres are active.
- **Mkhondo:** Acknowledges reclaimers and private companies involved in recycling. Education and awareness initiatives are underway, and some community-based recycling projects exist. Three formal buy-back centres operate in the municipality, although the municipality itself is not involved in recycling.
- **Lekwa:** The IWMP does not report any active waste minimisation or recycling efforts.
- **Govan Mbeki:** Refers to unspecified recycling initiatives and promotes awareness campaigns. Businesses and group housing are encouraged to submit waste minimisation plans in exchange for reduced service fees. The municipality operates a DFFE-funded buy-back centre in eMbalenhle, managed by cooperatives, which recycled 310 tons between November 2020 and October 2021. Private buy-back centres recycled 1,941 tons in the same period.
- **Chief Albert Luthuli Municipality (CALM):** Reports no active minimisation efforts due to budget constraints, staff shortages and a poorly functioning fleet. There are plans for awareness campaigns and the hiring of temporary workers to address collection backlogs.
- **Dr Pixley Ka Isaka Seme:** Mentions a proposed recycling project in Juba Park but no current minimisation or recycling initiatives. Reported challenges include budget constraints, vacancies, aging infrastructure, rapid informal settlement growth and gaps in technical capacity.

Workshop participants highlighted that several ongoing minimisation and recycling initiatives in local municipalities were not reflected in their respective IWMPs. It is possible these will be included in the updated IWMPs currently under review. More detailed and up-to-date reporting in future planning documents will support better coordination and planning across the district.

4.4. Municipal Bylaws

Most municipalities reported having outdated or draft waste management bylaws still awaiting formal approval. The IWMPs did not provide detail on the contents of the proposed bylaws. During the July 2025 workshop, officials confirmed that updated bylaws are pending final approval alongside their respective IWMPs and IDPs.

5. GSDM's Integration Landscape

Despite the GSDM's rural character and distance from major recycling markets, a significant number of reclaimers are actively engaged in waste recovery throughout the district. A range of stakeholders—including local and provincial governments, producer responsibility organisations (PROs) and reclaimer organisations such as the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) and the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA)—have initiated various reclaimer integration programmes in the area. In line with the Waste Picker Integration Guideline (2020), it is critical that new integration efforts build on existing initiatives and draw lessons from them rather than duplicating or overlooking prior work.

This section of the report begins by examining the inclusion of reclaimers and integration initiatives in the reviewed Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Integrated Waste Management Plans (IWMPs). It then presents findings from interviews with PROs and reclaimer organisations, and concludes with information on a provincial initiative—the Zonda Insila Programme (ZIP)—shared during the July 21–22, 2025 workshop. Notably, many external stakeholders' activities are either not mentioned or only partially reflected in the IDPs and IWMPs. It is essential that future iterations of these planning documents provide a comprehensive overview of all reclaimer integration activities across stakeholders to support more accurate and effective municipal planning.

5.1. Official Municipal Programmes and Plans

5.1.1 Inclusion of reclaimers in IDPs and IWMPs

South Africa has adopted a number of important national instruments promoting waste picker integration, including the 2020 Waste Picker Integration Guideline, the 2020 National Waste Management Strategy (which mandates integration at municipal level), and the 2021 amendments to the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) Regulations, which require PROs to integrate reclaimers and compensate them with a service fee. However, no active municipal reclaimer

integration programmes are documented; and none of the IDPs or IWMPs reviewed make reference to national policy commitments; references to reclaimer integration programmes in the IDPs and IWMPs are minimal; no active municipal is documented. Feedback from the July 2025 workshop suggests that municipal officials have limited familiarity with these frameworks, highlighting a need for further training and capacity-building by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) and the South African Local Government Association (SALGA).

Some municipalities mention plans to develop reclaimer databases (which may be redundant if reclaimers are registered on the South African Waste Picker Registration System, SAWPRS), conduct training sessions, and establish buy-back centres. However, as seen in the preceding section, municipalities appear to be relying heavily on PROs and the private sector to lead these efforts. Specific references to reclaimers and integration activities in municipal planning documents are as follows:

- **Msukaligwa** reports that reclaimers are “allowed” to operate on the landfill site, and that the municipality has held capacity-building sessions. There are plans to expand recycling in partnership with PROs.
- **Dipaleseng** notes reclaimer activity at the Balfour, Grootvlei and Greylingstad disposal sites, and mentions a private buy-back centre purchasing recyclables from reclaimers.
- **Mkhondo** allows 63 reclaimers to operate at the Piet Retief landfill and has hosted capacity-building information sessions. The municipality notes that it aims to collaborate more closely with PROs to address challenges faced by reclaimers and plans to establish a reclaimer database.
- **Lekwa** expresses concern that reclaimer activity interferes with landfill operations and links reclaimers to burning at the site. Nonetheless, the municipality recognises the importance of formalising and integrating reclaimers, and plans to promote recycling, develop a recycling manual and create a reclaimer database.
- **Govan Mbeki** acknowledges reclaimer activity at the Secunda landfill and outlines plans to register reclaimers in a database. The municipality operates a buy-back centre in eMbalenhle, which is managed by cooperatives.
- **Chief Albert Luthuli** intends to create a reclaimer database and formalise reclaimers into cooperatives or small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs).

- **Dr Pixley Ka Isaka Seme** references only the national government's COVID-19 waste picker relief programme, with no further mention of integration or support initiatives.

5.1.2 Ad-hoc municipal integration efforts

Interviews with municipal officials and stakeholders revealed that there have been official efforts to integrate reclaimers into municipal waste management systems within the GSDM. However, in the absence of a coherent policy framework, approaches to reclaimer engagement and integration have been ad-hoc, fragmented and inconsistently implemented across municipalities, often shaped by individual municipal leadership, resource availability and local priorities.

Notably, in Lekwa, officials reported targeted infrastructure upgrades at the Standerton landfill site, including the installation of water points and ablution facilities aimed at improving working conditions for reclaimers. Several municipalities have also initiated efforts to register reclaimers in order to better understand and manage who is working on their landfill sites, while, as noted above, others have stated in their IWMPs that they intend to roll out similar initiatives. These local registries operate independently and are not linked to the South African Waste Picker Registration System (SAWPRS), resulting in a lack of coordination and standardisation across the district. Registering reclaimers on local systems, rather than SAWPRS, also means that these reclaimers do not qualify to receive the EPR service fee from PROs. During the workshop, participants also noted a number of activities and planned activities that are not included in the reviewed IWMPs. As noted above, it will benefit the municipalities to ensure that all relevant information is included in future iterations of the IWMPs and IDPs.

5.2. The role of Producer Responsibility Organisations in Gert Sibande

As far as we could determine during the July 2025 workshop, the following PROs are involved in GSDM: PETCO; Fibre Circle; and Metpac.

- **PETCO** is active in Balfour; Bethal; Breyten; Ermelo; Kinross; Secunda; and Standerton. PETCO shared that they provide training to reclaimers mainly on the landfill sites on different products and how to sort through them in order to earn a better income. PETCO also introduces reclaimers to potential buyers and, where needed, supplies PPE and bulk bags to reclaimers. While full PPE was not provided, various incentives such as raincoats, reflector vests, caps and gloves were distributed. Exceptions were Secunda and Balfour, which did not receive any incentives. PETCO is not yet paying the EPR service fee to reclaimers in the GSDM because it has not yet put in place necessary systems. PETCO expressed the wish to deliver more sustainable services related to infrastructure.
- **Fibre Circle** has a dedicated person (Advocate Murphy) responsible for introducing the EPR regulations and PRO activities to the municipalities and signing MOU's with interested municipalities. In the GSDM, Fibre Circle has signed an MOU with the

Msukaligwa local Municipality. Fibre Circle presented a draft MOU to the GSDM, but it is yet to be signed. Currently, Fibre Circle is predominantly active with KM Waste Management Solutions, a buyback centre which belongs to a group of 15 reclaimers in Ermelo. Fibre Circle supports the entrepreneurs in their business development. They collect, buy and deliver recyclables to bigger buyback centres and recyclers such as Mpact and mills. Fibre Circle provides KM Waste management with what Advocate Murphy refers to as “Tools of the trade” in collaboration with the municipality and the Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Land, and Environmental Affairs (DARDLEA). Transport is seen as one of the major barriers for KM waste management solutions, which Fibre Circle plans to address. Service fees are paid to the reclaimers from KM Waste Management through Mpact’s buy-back centre (BBC), to which KM Waste Management sells some of their collected recyclables. KM cannot manage service fees yet, but it is part of Fibre Circles’s long-term plan to enable KM waste management to pay service fees. (During the workshop we met some members of KM waste management solutions. It appears as if they recruited reclaimers from communities who are paid from EPWP money and then get additional payment from the sale of recyclables.

- **Metpac’s** involvement is in the initial phases. In Lekwa municipality Metpac and the municipality are in the process of signing an MOU. Metpac held an event to hand over PPE and trolleys to assist reclaimers to transport collected materials to the storing areas.

5.3. Reclaimer Organisations

The African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) and the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA), the two main reclaimer organisations in South Africa, both have a presence in the GSDM. The following integration initiatives undertaken by these organisations in the GSDM is drawn from interviews with their respective representatives.

5.3.1 SAWPA

Since 2017, when SAWPA began organising landfill reclaimers in the GSDM, the organisation has encouraged and supported reclaimers in the area (and elsewhere) to form cooperatives, several of which are still functioning. SAWPA representatives interviewed noted that the organisation was particularly active in the GSDM in the past, when the late Simon Mbata would visit to organise and support reclaimers as part of SAWPA’s “Zero Waste Revolution”. Although SAWPA currently does not have active projects in the GSDM, participants in the July 2025 workshop fondly reflected on the Zero Waste Revolution period in the organisation’s history. The provincial SAWPA coordinator noted that they recently received funding which will enable him to travel to the GSDM, where he intends to sign up SAWPA members in a “registration campaign”. The

planned campaign will not register reclaimers on SAWPRS, but will rather recruit them to join SAWPA. Although not part of an official SAWPA project, members of a SAWPA cooperative in Ermelo are already encouraging street reclaimers to form cooperatives. SAWPA representatives interviewed reported that SAWPA has not received support from PROs in the GSDM, but has received some support from the Environmental Justice Fund.

SAWPA representatives reported that although the GSDM and local municipalities have poor relations with reclaimers, these workers make significant contributions to the GSDM. They noted that reclaimers “are minimizing the waste at the landfill and they are minimizing transport costs for the municipality,” adding: “They are keeping the environment clean. They are creating job opportunities for themselves.” Based on these contributions, they argued that the municipality should transform how it relates to reclaimers and should partner with reclaimers to promote integration. As one SAWPA representative argued, the municipality “should not do anything involving waste pickers without involving us. If they shut us out, we won’t be able to fully protect what belongs to us. They shouldn’t do anything involving waste management without involving us.”

As part of the integration support required by reclaimers in the GSDM, the SAWPA representatives emphasised access to information; access to land; capacity-building to educate other reclaimers; education for reclaimers on how to better sort recyclables and increase their incomes; and greater collaboration between the municipality and reclaimers.

5.3.2 ARO

The African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) has been active in the GSDM since 2021, when an ARO reclainer organiser from Johannesburg relocated to the GSDM and began working there as a reclainer and organising local reclaimers. In the absence of local markets for reclaimed material, the prices reclaimers received for fewer materials they sold were far lower than in Johannesburg. This led the ARO organiser to reach out to the organisation for support in the GSDM.

Building from this initiative, ARO established a number of integration initiatives in the GSDM aimed at enabling greater access by local reclaimers’ to the recycling market and improving their incomes and working conditions. In the past 4 years, ARO has successfully raised over R6.5 million from international donors (the Alliance to End Plastic Waste, the Unilever Foundation, and the World Bank) and two corporations (Dow Chemical, Coca-Cola Bottling South Africa, and Safripol) for reclainer integration programmes in parts of the GSDM. ARO also secured small-scale supplementary support for these programmes from PETCO and Polyco, and earns a small income from a waste collection contract with a shopping mall in Dundonald. ARO currently conducts integration projects in the following parts of the GSDM: Mayflower, Dundonald, Ermelo and Mkhondo. The ARO integration programmes include:

- **Selling in Joburg: late 2021 - 2023**

In this programme, ARO purchased recyclables from members in the GSDM transported them to Johannesburg. Although the project was not funded, ARO was able to fetch higher prices in Johannesburg than reclaimers would have received in the GSDM, while retaining some of the income to offset the diesel and other costs.

- **AEPW Phase 1: August 2023 - May 2024**

This project expanded the first project with USD \$60,000 support from the Alliance to End Plastic Waste (AEPW) (approximately R1,066,000) as part of a larger ARO project primarily focused on Johannesburg. With this external funding, ARO rented sorting and storage space in Ermelo and paid for working capital to purchase recyclables from reclaimers, as well as diesel and other costs to transport the materials for sale in Johannesburg. PETCO provided reclaimers with bags; Polyco provided reclaimers with trolleys; and Safripol purchased a baling machine used to bale the materials before transporting them to Johannesburg.

- **AEPW Phase 2 - December 2023 – June 2025**

Phase two of the AEPW project received R2.8 million from the AEPW, plus an additional R540,000 from Dow Chemical for working capital. The AEPW funds were used to rent a formal space in the GSDM, pay salaries for 10 reclaimers (balers, operators, loaders, sorters, and drivers), purchase diesel, cover operational expenses and purchase a four tonne truck, used to collect materials from reclaimers and provide separation at source services to schools and businesses. One four-tonne truck, used in the GSDM, collected directly from reclaimers two days per week. The project purchased materials from 50 reclaimers.

- **Transform: Feb 2025 – April 2026**

The Transform project received GBP 100,000 (approximately R2.42 million) from the Unilever Foundation, with PPE provided by Coca-Cola Bottling South Africa (CCBSA). These funds are used to pay a project manager; develop training materials; conduct capacity-building workshops with reclaimers, the municipality and communities; and conduct cleanup campaigns.

- **SAWPRS Registration - 2024 - June 2025**

As part of a larger World Bank Pro Blue funded SAWPRS registration campaign, ARO spent approximately R225,000 registering reclaimers in the GSDM on SAWPRS.

Approximately 546 reclaimers in the GSDM have been registered and verified on SAWPRS. They are yet to start receiving the EPR service fee. ARO is not aware of any plans by PROs to undertake the initiatives required to pay these reclaimers the service fee to which they are now legally entitled.

- **Contract to collect waste and recyclables from the Dundonald Mall**

ARO is directly integrating reclaimers into the provision of solid waste management and recycling services to private companies through a R7,500 per month contract to collect waste and recyclables from the new mall in Dundonald. While the project has given reclaimers access to the mall's materials, Shoprite has a national contract to give boxes (K4) to Mpact, which significantly reduces the materials accessed by reclaimers.

ARO is also seeking funds for a third phase of the AEPW contract to upgrade the existing site, purchase an additional four-tonne truck and expand its integration initiatives to include more reclaimers in additional parts of the GSDM.

ARO representatives noted that while they have not yet directly partnered with the GSDM, they have developed good relations with GSDM officials, who are very supportive and enthusiastic about collaborating with them around current projects. ARO noted that the municipality has been much more receptive to partnering with them and supporting integration than metropolitan municipalities in Gauteng.

According to its representatives, ARO's main challenges in implementing integration initiatives in the GSDM are access to land and inadequate understanding of integration by councillors and community members. The latter do not understand that the projects are focused specifically on reclaimers and seek to include non-reclaimer supporters in the projects. These challenges are not limited to the GSDM; they arise in all municipalities where ARO works. The ARO representatives also emphasised the need for core funding for ARO from PROs and government, saying the organisation was only able to pursue integration work in the GSDM when it secured funding from international donors.

An ARO representative highlighted the challenges of advancing its integration initiatives in the GSDM that arise when municipal officials, PROs and other stakeholders are not sufficiently aware of the *Waste Picker Integration Guidelines* and the integration requirements placed on municipalities and the PROs by the *2020 National Waste Management Strategy* and the EPR Regulations. He elaborated:

ARO is doing the organising on the ground. Which it is proven to be doing well...unfortunately, we are also forced to organise again from the top, which is educating everyone about what has to be done. You know, and we need support to be doing this...I think we need to ... speak to policymakers and say - there is no structure that needs to educate these stakeholders. All of these stakeholders - PROs are not organised. They're working in silos. Police, government, they're not organised, they're not educated. ...To

make these programs work. We're forced to organise all the different stakeholders. So we bring industries, we bring PROs, we bring local municipalities, we're bringing policy makers into one space so we can define to them - work together in defining - implementing integration. I think it's not fair for ARO. Yes, it is our job. But we need to start talking about who is doing this job of organising all these people in these sectors? And... How are we supporting those people?

He called on the national government to prioritise capacity-building among municipal officials, PROs and other stakeholders to better understand and implement integration.

The ARO representative also highlighted as a necessity the creation of a reclamer integration committee in the GSDM and province, arguing that, "we need to have everyone in the value chain in the same room to make the process simpler and make everyone accountable. The reason why I am saying this is that if everyone was at the same table with the same understanding, we could have done all the districts in Mpumalanga by now". He emphasised the importance of moving beyond speeches at conferences towards committees in which stakeholders collaborate with dedicated municipal office bearers on an ongoing basis around integration initiatives, to ensure quick decision-making and action. Another ARO representative emphasised the importance of implementing reclamer-led separation at source so that volumes of recyclables diverted from the waste stream increase to a level adequate to draw investment to a local recycling plant.

5.3. Provincial Government

Neither the review of the IDPs and IWMPs, nor the interviews with municipal officials provided information on provincial recycling initiatives that impact reclamer integration. However, participants at the July 2025 workshop indicated that the Mpumalanga Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Land, and Environmental Affairs (DARDLEA) runs a recycling programme called the Zonda Insila Program (ZIP) which employs a number of workshop participants. Established in 2019, the ZIP is part of the national Green Good Deeds initiative. The ZIP encourages youth to form cooperatives, which are then paid a stipend by DARDLEA to collect recyclables and clean up illegal dumping sites. Cooperative members supplement the stipends through the sale of recyclables. The ZIP programme received support from several PROs and Plastics SA, which have provided baling machines and personal protective equipment (PPE) to cooperative members.

At the July 2025 workshop, a reclamer noted that as the ZIP prioritised unemployed youth over reclaimers, threatening reclaimers' access to recyclables and undermining their incomes and integration. The implication of this statement is that the ZIP has, to date, effectively contributed to the type of "de-integrating" recycling initiatives discussed in the literature review of this study.

DARDLEA representatives noted that the department was aware of concerns and critiques such as these. As a result, the next round of the ZIP will focus on recruiting people already working as reclaimers. This is a positive example of the government's willingness to recognise unintended problems that may result when reclaimers are not included in programme design and revise an existing programme to facilitate reclaimer integration.

6. A Snapshot of Reclaimers and Reclaimer Activity

The purpose of this baseline survey was to contribute to an understanding of where reclaimers are working, their key characteristics, livelihoods, and challenges and opportunities they face. Drawing on responses captured from 324 reclaimers across 23 sites located within all seven of the GSDM's constituent Local Municipalities, the baseline results highlight that reclaimers in the GSDM work across diverse sites. These include landfills, dumpsites and urban kerbside areas where reclaimers play a significant role in diverting recyclable materials from disposal. The findings show that while reclaimers contribute meaningfully to the local circular economy and provide vital waste management functions, they face persistent challenges such as income instability, lack of protective equipment, limited access to basic services and inadequate recognition within municipal systems. Against these challenges, the survey highlights clear opportunities to strengthen relationships, improve working conditions and co-design practical integration measures. The evidence is intended to help the seven local municipalities within the GSDM implement the Waste Picker Integration Guidelines in ways that improve reclaimers' lives and livelihoods, enhance circularity and strengthen waste management service delivery.

6.1. Reclaimer Demographics

Survey results provide a clear, evidence-based picture of who reclaimers are, the contexts within which they work and the factors that shape their livelihoods across the district. First, the age distribution indicates that reclaiming is an important source of income for people across a broad age range, but is concentrated among working-age adults. Of the 324 reclaimers surveyed, just under 4% (12 reclaimers) are aged 18 to 24 years, while 11% (36 reclaimers) are between 25 and 29 years old. The largest age groups are those between 30 and 39 years (23% of respondents, or 75 people) and 40 to 49 years (27.5%, or 89 people). A further 23% (74 reclaimers) are aged 50 to 59, and nearly 12% (38 reclaimers) are 60 years old or older (see Figure 1). This spread shows that reclaiming is not limited to young or elderly workers but is a significant, long-term, livelihood for adults in their main earning years.

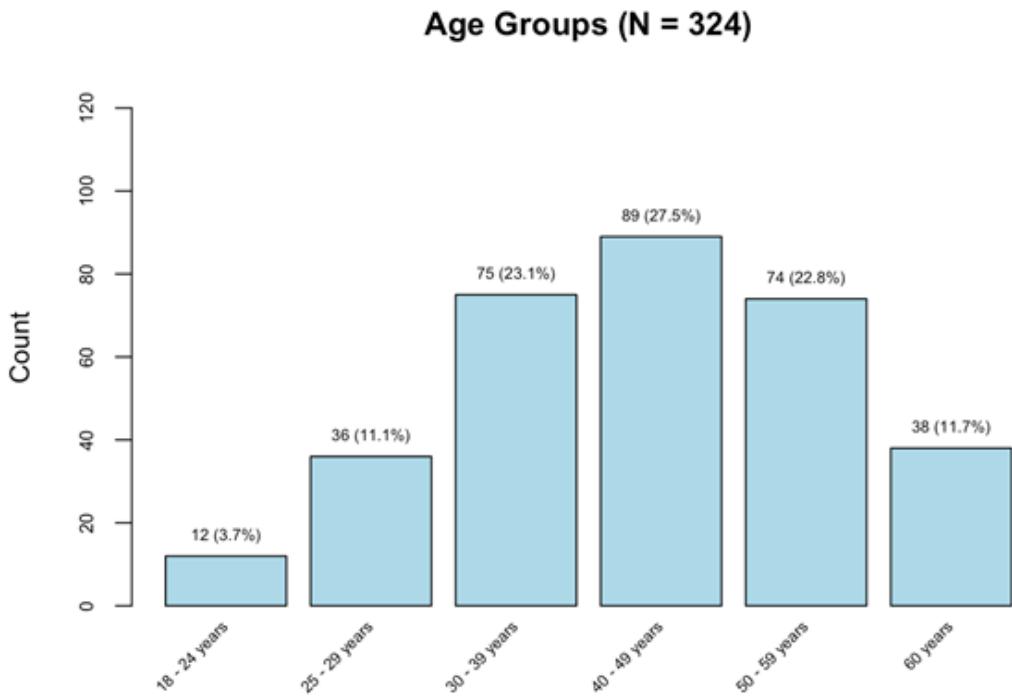


Figure 1: Age groups of reclaimers surveyed

Next, the survey sharply confirms the racialised nature of reclaiming in South Africa. Almost all respondents (323 reclaimers, or 99.7%) identify as African/Black, with only one person identifying as Coloured. In terms of nationality, the majority of reclaimers in the GSDM are South African citizens (295 reclaimers, or 91%). Small numbers of reclaimers come from neighbouring countries: 14 are from eSwatini, 7 from Zimbabwe, 7 from Mozambique and one from another country (see Figure 2). Notably, most reclaimers (318, or 98%) have an official identification document from their country of citizenship, while only six do not. This suggests that administrative barriers to registering reclaimers and including them in municipal systems should be minimal. Language diversity is another important factor for integration and communication. IsiZulu is the most common first language, spoken at home by 62% of respondents (201 reclaimers). IsiSwati is spoken by 71 reclaimers (22%), and Sesotho by 35 reclaimers (11%). An additional 16 reclaimers reported 'Other' languages, and one person indicated Afrikaans.

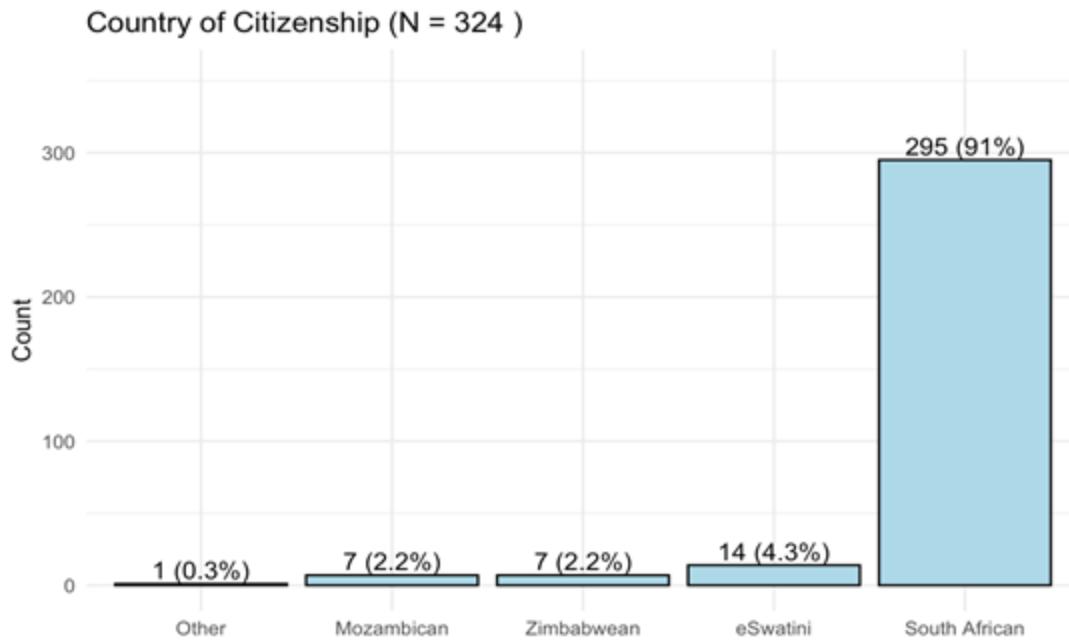


Figure 2: Nationalities of reclaimers surveyed

Levels of formal education vary widely. Almost 15% of reclaimers (47 people) have never attended school. Just over a quarter (92 reclaimers) completed primary school, and 38% (123 reclaimers) have some high school education but did not matriculate. Only 53 reclaimers (16%) completed high school (see Figure 3). Very few respondents reported having a tertiary education: seven reclaimers hold an undergraduate qualification, and only one reported a postgraduate qualification. One respondent selected ‘Other’. This highlights that reclaiming is an essential livelihood for people who have had limited access to formal education and may face exclusion from formal labour markets. It also underlines the importance of valuing reclaimers’ practical knowledge and experience, while providing opportunities for training and skills development where needed.

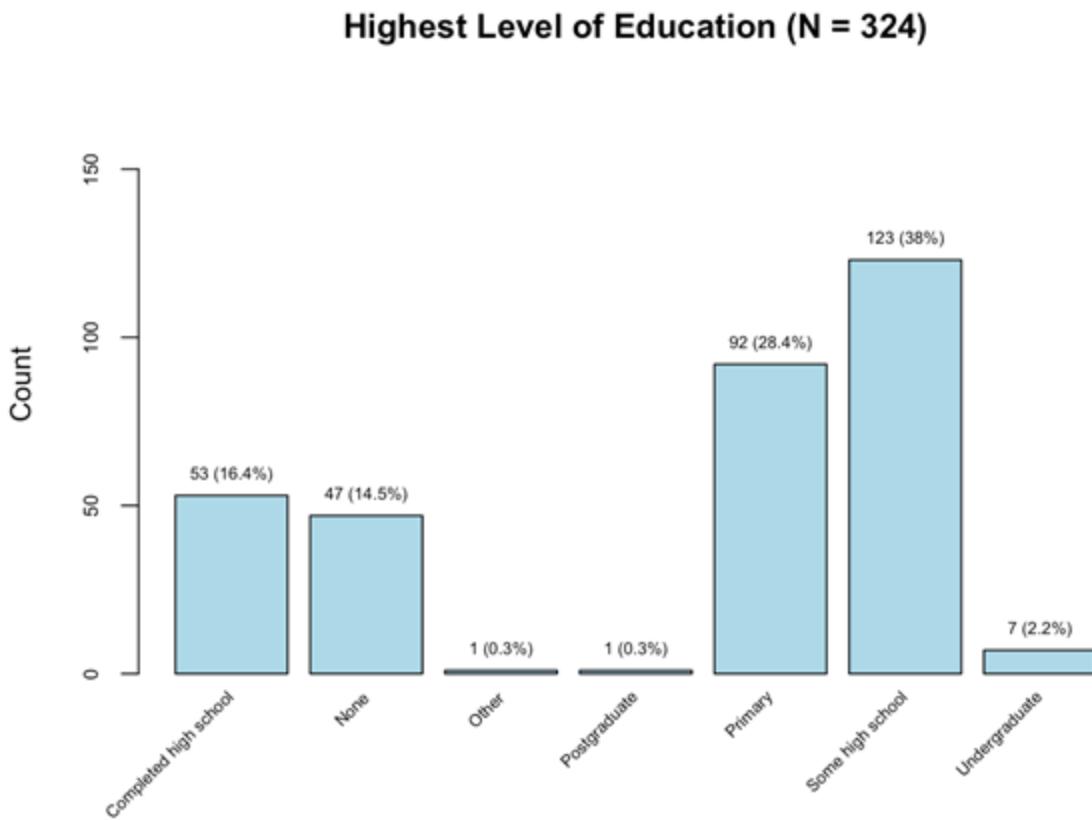


Figure 3: Highest level of education achieved amongst surveyed reclaimers

The results show that reclaiming is not simply a short-term survival strategy but, for many, a long-term source of income and work. On average, respondents have been reclaiming for nearly eight years (mean: 7.9 years; median: six years), with some reporting over three decades in the sector. This points to an established, skilled workforce whose contributions to local waste diversion and recycling are vital but often undervalued. Overall, these demographic insights demonstrate that reclaimers in the GSDM are predominantly local, working-age, South Africans with extensive experience and deep knowledge of the recycling sector. They work within a context shaped by historical inequalities, limited formal employment opportunities and diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Lastly, it is important to note that while the survey results provide a useful snapshot of reclaimers' nationality and documentation status, this data should be interpreted with caution. In follow-up debrief interviews, fieldworkers suggested that some respondents may have intentionally misrepresented their nationality or declined to participate altogether due to concerns about their legal status and possible repercussions. As a result, it is likely that the true proportion of foreign nationals reclaiming across the district is higher than reported in the baseline survey. The same applies to levels of formal documentation and identity papers, which may in reality be lower than

what was disclosed. This uncertainty highlights the need for ongoing engagement with reclaimers and trusted intermediaries to build relationships and ensure that future data collection can better reflect the realities of reclaimers' citizenship, migration and documentation challenges.

6.2. Where Reclaimers Work

The results indicate that the work of reclaimers is spread widely across the GSDM. The presence of reclaimers in every one of its seven local municipalities underscores the critical role they play in keeping valuable recyclables out of landfill, extending the life of municipal waste facilities and providing an informal but vital service, particularly in areas where waste collection is irregular or limited. Their presence across both larger towns and smaller rural settlements highlights the importance of recognising that reclaimer activity is not confined to big urban centres alone; rather, it is deeply embedded in the district's waste landscape as a whole.

Within this district-wide picture, Albert Luthuli Local Municipality stands out as having the highest overall number of reclaimers recorded during the survey period (see Figure 4). This is largely driven by the diversity of sites reclaimers are working at within the LM, including multiple municipal landfill sites and street-based kerbside routes near rural villages and smaller towns. The Secunda Dumpsite in Govan Mbeki Local Municipality emerges as the single largest individual site of reclaimer activity in the entire district. This site attracts a large number of reclaimers each day because of the sheer volume and mix of household, commercial and industrial waste that passes through it, providing more consistent material recovery opportunities than many smaller dumpsites. As the district moves towards implementing the national Waste Picker Integration Guidelines, Secunda represents a clear priority location for integration interventions.

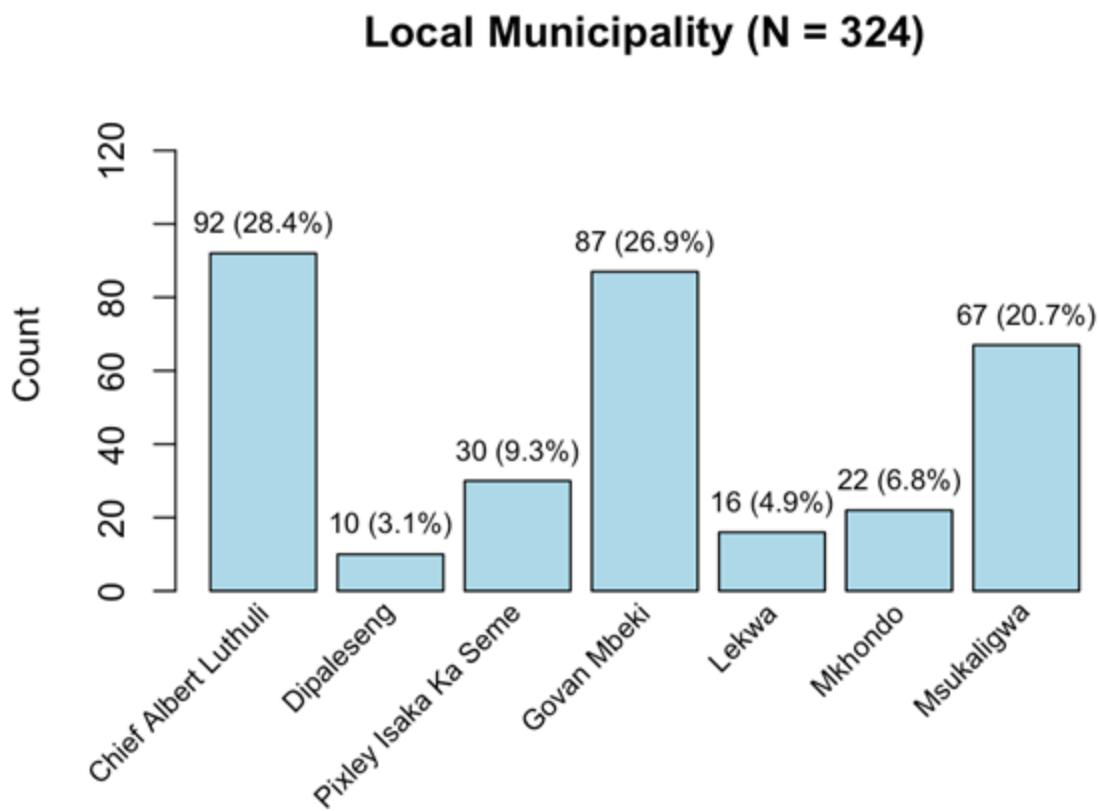


Figure 4: Reclaimers sampled (30%) by Local Municipality

Taken together, these findings show that reclaimers are working in every local municipality in the GSDM, adapting flexibly to different waste flows and local contexts. The widespread but uneven nature of this activity highlights the need for tailored, context-specific, integration plans that acknowledge the reality of how reclaimers operate across sites and municipal boundaries. It also positions reclaimers within the district's waste management system as an integral part of the broader recycling economy, even if this contribution has remained largely informal and under-supported to date.

These results confirm that reclaimers in the GSDM make use of a wide range of sites. Most reclaimers named two or more different types of sites, demonstrating the flexible, multi-site strategies they rely upon to secure a steady flow of materials and income. Formal landfills and municipal dumpsites are central to this system: a large proportion of reclaimers reported working at major sites such as the Ermelo Landfill and Secunda Dumpsite. These large sites are especially important for reclaimers who do not have the means or equipment to push trolleys over long distances. A significant number of reclaimers also reported collecting recyclables from kerbside routes, streets and informal or illegal dumpsites closer to their homes.

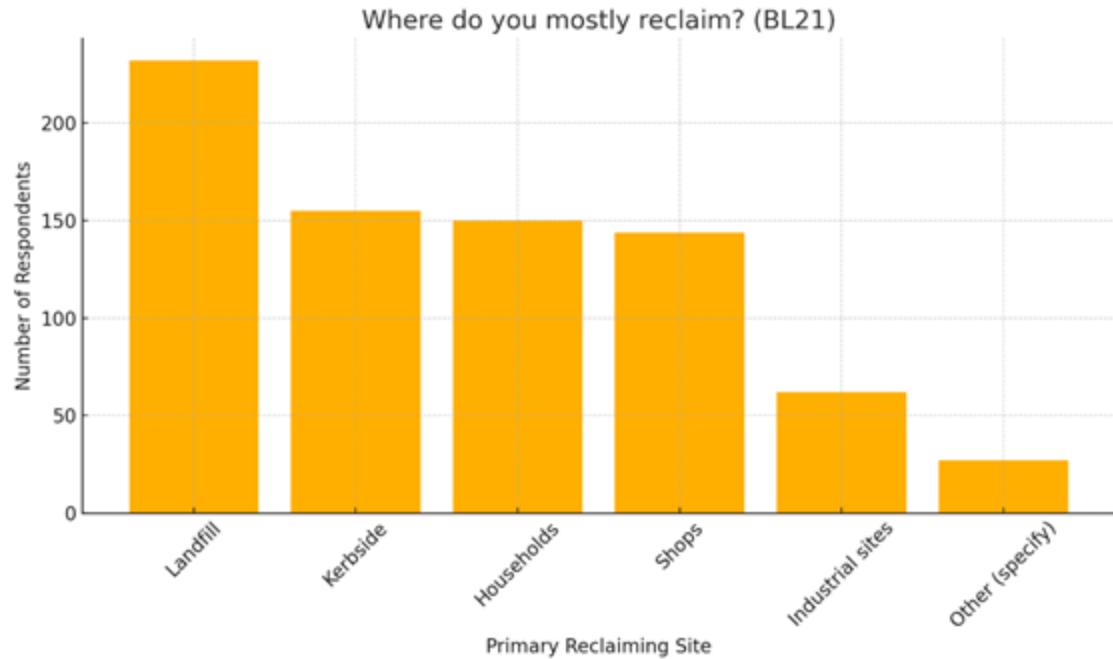


Figure 5: Locations where Reclaimers reclaim

When these responses are broken down by gender, some important patterns emerge. Men were somewhat more likely to mention working at formal landfills and large dumpsites. This is consistent with observed dynamics where larger sites often have more physically demanding conditions and are sometimes informally controlled in ways that can disadvantage women. In contrast, women reclaimers more often reported using kerbside routes or informal dumping areas nearer to residential neighbourhoods, which may feel safer or be more practical for balancing family responsibilities.

Correlating age with worksite, reclaimers working in landfills are slightly more likely to fall in the older age bands, with the largest groups aged 40–49 years (64 reclaimers) and 50–59 years (53 reclaimers). Similarly, kerbside and household collection have sizeable numbers in the 40–49 and 50–59 age bands, but with notable numbers in younger brackets: for example, kerbside work includes more reclaimers in the 30–39 age range (30) than the older 50–59 age group (40). Across sites such as shops, industrial sites and households, the distribution shows that reclaimers across 30–39 and 40–49 are the largest age bands — suggesting that mid-career reclaimers dominate across all work settings, while younger reclaimers (18–24 years) are present but in much smaller numbers. Notably, even older reclaimers (60 years and older) are active across all sites, with 22 reclaiming at landfills, 23 at kerbside and a smaller but clear presence at industrial sites and shops. This data show that reclaiming is not confined to any single age group or work setting. While middle-aged reclaimers (30–59 years) dominate, younger and older people work alongside each other across all sites. This suggests that any integration or support strategies should consider the

needs of a broad age range, including younger reclaimers building livelihoods and older reclaimers working into retirement age, often without social protection.

Across local municipalities, the picture reflects how local waste flows and infrastructure shape reclaimer work patterns. Albert Luthuli Local Municipality stands out, with the highest overall number of reclaimers surveyed. Reclaimers there often listed a mix of the main dumpsite plus nearby informal spots, showing how important multiple collection points are in more rural settings. In Govan Mbeki Local Municipality, the Secunda Dumpsite consistently appears in the data as the single largest individual site for reclaimers. However, many reclaimers there also mentioned supplementing their work by collecting along kerbside routes or informal spots, especially when landfill access was restricted. In municipalities such as Msukaligwa and Mkhondo, respondents frequently listed more than one site type, combining work at larger sites like Ermelo Landfill, with smaller informal sites and street routes within settlements like Wesselton. Smaller municipalities such as Pixley Ka Seme, Lekwa and Dipaleseng also show this overlapping pattern, although their numbers are lower overall. Here, reclaimers often rely on informal dumpsites and street collection as municipal dumpsites may see a lower volume of waste.

These findings highlight a few critical insights for integration planning: most reclaimers do not limit themselves to a single site or method; rather, their ability to switch between different spaces is crucial for maintaining income security. Gender differences matter; women may be more reliant on sites that are accessible and feel safer, while men often dominate access to larger dumpsites. Municipality-level variations are significant. Some LMs have large central dumpsites that attract reclaimers from surrounding towns, while others rely more heavily on informal dump areas and street collection routes. This flexible and overlapping way of working should be a core consideration in any effort to formalise and support reclaimers' livelihoods. Integration plans must recognise that reclaimers move fluidly across multiple spaces, and that both gender and local contexts shape how and where they work.

6.3. How Reclaimers Work

The survey suggests that reclaimers within the GSDM work primarily alone, with only a small fraction indicating that they work with others or within any kind of formal cooperative structure. For example, in Chief Albert Luthuli Local Municipality, 70 reclaimers said they work alone, compared to just 19 who work with family and 3 who reported being part of a registered cooperative (see Figure 6). Similarly, in Govan Mbeki, which includes the large Secunda Dumpsite, 84 reclaimers reported working alone and only three mentioned working with family. None indicated belonging to a cooperative. Large formal dumpsites such as Secunda and Ermelo are sites where reclaimers work side by side in significant numbers. Yet the practice of formally sharing income or working as a cooperative is rare. For example, 43 reclaimers at the Secunda Dumpsite said they work alone and just two indicated any family working arrangement, with no cooperative responses recorded. A few sites do stand out for slightly higher family work patterns,

such as kerbside reclaimers in Mpuluzi where 54 respondents said they work alone and 19 reported working with family members. This suggests that kerbside or street-based reclaimers, often in more rural settings, may rely more on informal family-based arrangements than those based at larger, centralised landfills. The question as to whether reclaimers share their income reinforces this point: sharing is generally limited to immediate family units rather than broader group arrangements. There is little evidence to suggest significant income pooling or cooperative marketing among unrelated reclaimers, even at sites that gather large numbers daily.

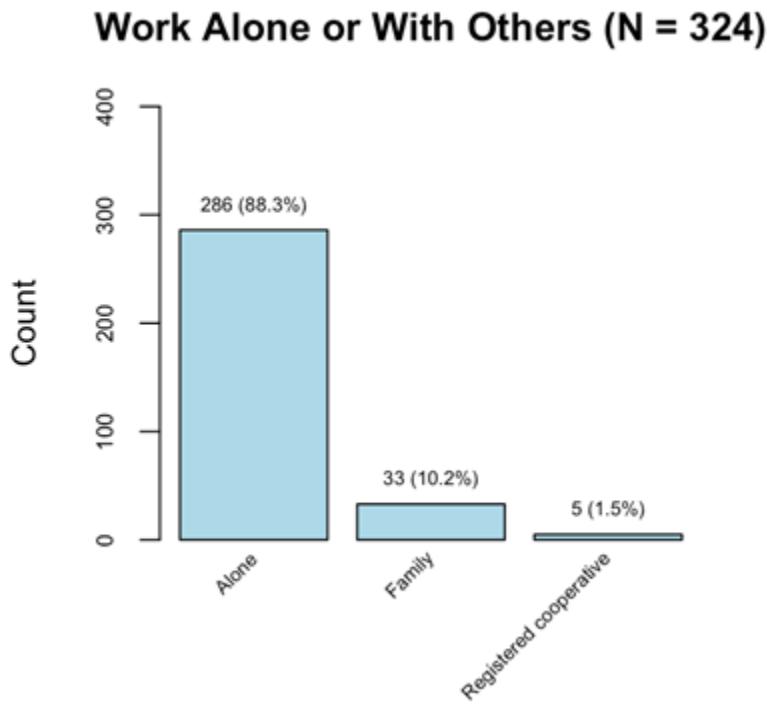


Figure 6: How reclaimers work, as individuals or with others

In addition, the data show that very few reclaimers are formally part of a reclaimer organisation or association. Across the full district, only 21 out of 324 reclaimers reported belonging to an organisation such as SAWPA or ARO (see Figure 7). For example, in Govan Mbeki LM only four reclaimers reported organisational membership, while in Msukaligwa LM and Mkhondo LM the numbers were even lower. A notable exception is the Dundonald Mall, where all three reclaimers belong to ARO and work in a cooperative arrangement—an outlier that reflects ARO's intervention within the area rather than a wider trend.

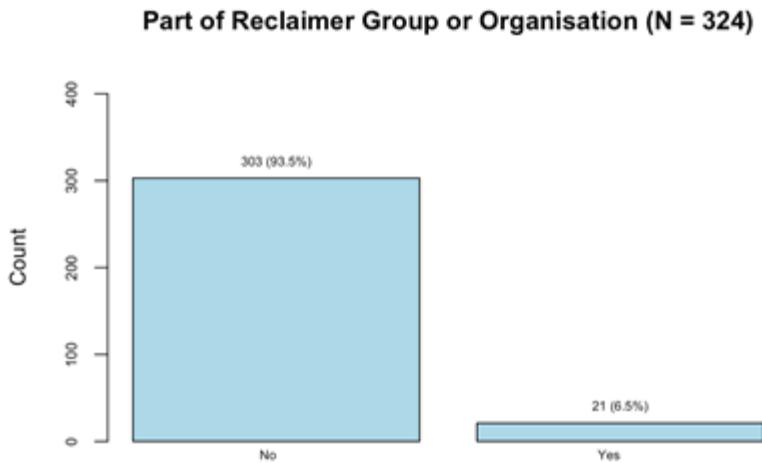


Figure 7: Membership of a reclaimer organisation

Patterns of registration on the South African Waste Picker Registration System (SAWPRS) reveal some important local differences. Overall, registration remains relatively low and uneven across the district. While some municipalities show almost no registration, Chief Albert Luthuli stands out with the highest number of registered reclaimers (69 registered out of 92 respondents) — a clear reflection of targeted outreach by ARO. By contrast, major sites like Secunda Dumpsite — the single largest site of reclaimer activity — reported only two reclaimers registered out of 45 surveyed. This finding confirms that high-volume dumpsites do not automatically lead to higher levels of formal registration or integration. These results underline some important realities for municipal planning and support. Simply working at a large dumpsite does not mean that reclaimers are better organised, formally share income, or benefit from collective structures. In practice, reclaimers' work remains highly individualised, with most people relying on informal relationships and flexible arrangements to secure an income. Where collective organising and registration have taken root — like with the ARO interventions in Albert Luthuli LM — this is mainly due to the efforts of ARO rather than the scale or type of site alone. This suggests that future integration efforts should focus on supporting the work of reclaimer organisations, sponsoring registration drives, and practical help with communication and coordination between stakeholders.

6.4. What Reclaimers Collect

The results show that reclaimers in the GSDM collect a diverse range of materials, with a strong emphasis on high-volume, high-value recyclables. The most commonly collected items are clear or light-coloured polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles (307 respondents), followed closely by

Polypropylene (PP) (296), High-Density Polyethylene (HDPE) (294), and cans (294). Coloured PET is also widely reclaimed, with 276 respondents indicating that they collect it. Scrap metal remains an important income stream, with 259 reclaimers collecting it.

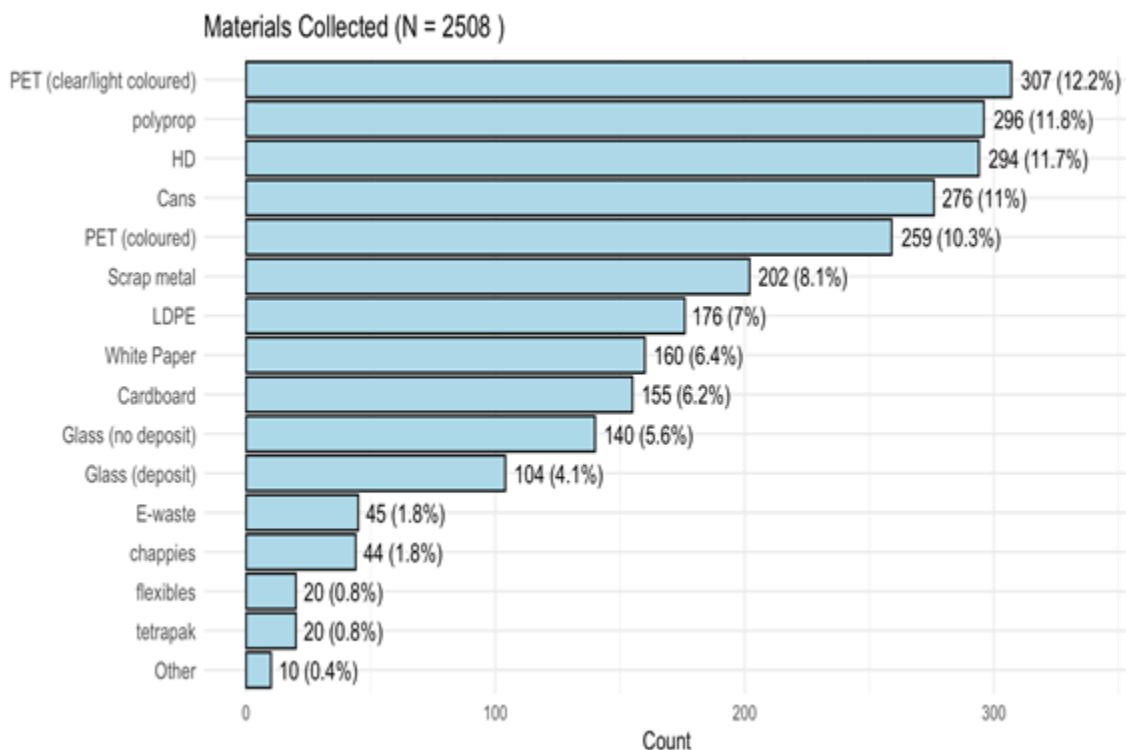


Figure 8: Materials collected

Materials such as Low-Density Polyethylene (LDPE) (202 respondents), white paper (176), cardboard (160) and both deposit and non-deposit glass (140–155) are collected less frequently but still represent a significant proportion of reclaimers' work. Notably, 104 respondents reported collecting e-waste, reflecting some diversification into higher-value but more complex and hazardous waste streams. Materials with the lowest collection rates include tetrapak (45), flexible packaging (44) and 'chappies' (snack wrappers) (at 81 respondents), suggesting limited market demand, low resale value, or practical challenges in storage and transport.

While reclaimers across the GSDM collect a broad mix of materials, there are clear variations by site and municipality. Larger urban sites like the Secunda and Ermelo dumpsites, as well as Govan Mbeki Municipality, show the widest range, with high counts for PET bottles, polyprop, HD plastics, scrap metal, cans and cardboard. This reflects the bigger and more diverse waste streams feeding these sites. By contrast, smaller rural dumpsites and kerbside routes, particularly in municipalities like Chief Albert Luthuli and Dipaleseng, see reclaimers focusing more on PET, polyprop, cardboard and cans, with fewer reporting scrap metal or glass. These differences demonstrate how local waste flows and site conditions shape what materials reclaimers can access.

The findings highlight that reclaimers prioritise recyclables with reliable demand and reasonable prices, while materials that are harder to sell or store tend to be less commonly collected. The presence of e-waste and glass in their work also shows the adaptive strategies some reclaimers use to increase their income opportunities, despite the additional risks or handling requirements. Overall, this diverse collection pattern demonstrates reclaimers' critical role in diverting multiple waste streams from landfill and supporting the local recycling economy.

6.5. Reclaimers Livelihoods

The survey shows that most reclaimers in the GSDM sell their recyclables monthly, with large dumpsites strongly favouring bulk sales. Sites like Bethal, Breyten and Elukwatin Dumpsites report 100% of reclaimers selling monthly, while Amsterdam Dumpsite shows two-thirds selling monthly and one-third weekly. This reflects how reclaimers at big sites store up larger loads to reduce transport costs and secure better prices. In contrast, sites with kerbside collection or mixed work patterns show more varied selling frequencies. At Ermelo Dumpsite, reclaimers are split between monthly (33%), weekly (43%) and daily (24%) sales, showing a balance between bulk storage and the need for regular income. Kerbside Reclaimers in Ermelo lean more towards monthly sales (75%), with a notable share selling weekly or daily. Overall, this variation highlights that reclaimers' selling strategies depend heavily on the type of site, storage options and the materials they collect. Reclaimers who sell frequently often do so because they have limited storage and need daily cash flow, while those who sell monthly must manage risks like theft or price fluctuations.

Furthermore, the results reveal that reclaimers rely on a variety of buyers to sell their collected recyclables, with informal channels dominating their sales pathways. The largest proportion of reclaimers (251 respondents) reported selling their materials through middlemen, indicating the strong presence of informal intermediaries, often located at dumpsites, who facilitate access to markets but may also limit direct negotiating power and earnings. Scrapyards are the second most common sales outlet, used by 194 reclaimers, reflecting the importance of these local facilities for handling metals and other bulk recyclables. A smaller number of reclaimers (69) sell to ARO, but just in Albert Luthuli where ARO's programmes are localised. Sales to other reclaimers (28 respondents) and buy-back centres (21 respondents) occur far less frequently, while only 6 respondents indicated selling through other channels.

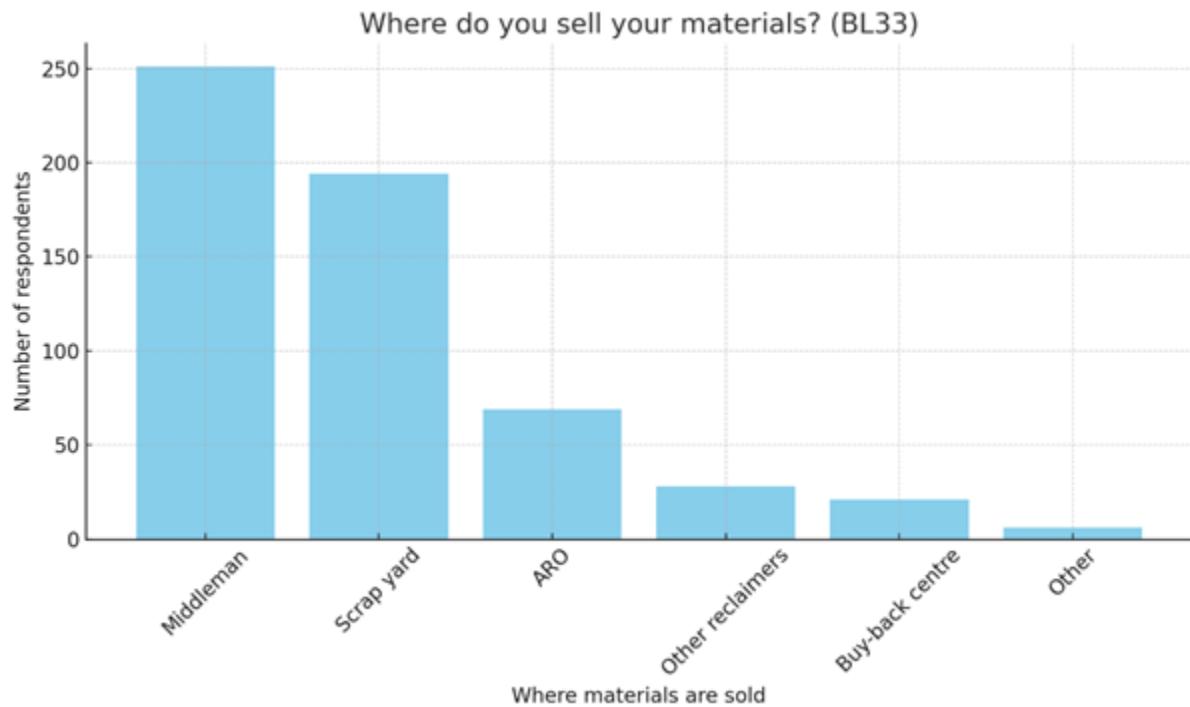


Figure 9: Where reclaimers sell their materials.

This pattern shows that reclaimers' livelihoods are heavily dependent on informal and semi-formal buyers, which can create vulnerability to price fluctuations, inconsistent payment terms and exploitative practices off middlemen. The relatively low engagement with buy-back centres suggests there may be opportunities to improve direct access to more stable and regulated markets. Strengthening these linkages could help reclaimers secure better prices, reduce dependence on intermediaries and enhance their integration into the formal recycling economy.

In addition, the vast majority of reclaimers in the GSDM store their materials before selling, with about 92% reporting some form of storage. Larger dumpsites like Bethal, Breyten and Secunda show universal storage use, as reclaimers bulk up loads to fetch better prices. However, a small share of reclaimers — mostly at sites like Ermelo Dumpsite, Mpuluzi Kerbside and Volksrust — reported having no storage. This reflects practical barriers such as lack of secure spaces or the risk of theft. For reclaimers working on kerbside routes, safe storage remains a particular challenge, which can push them to sell smaller loads more frequently and accept lower prices. The follow-up question on where reclaimers store materials reveals that most reclaimers use on-site storage at the dumpsite or landfill where they work. This is especially true at large sites like Secunda, Bethal, or Ermelo, where there is space to stockpile recyclables before transport. Others — especially kerbside or rural reclaimers — store materials at home or in their yards, which can create safety, security and community tension issues. A small number report storing materials with buyers or

scrapyards, reflecting more formal arrangements in areas where buy-back centres are accessible. Overall, the responses show that while most reclaimers have some form of storage, the quality and security of that storage varies greatly. Moreover, as we will see when we discuss challenges, 79% of reclaimers reported a lack of storage as a barrier to their work. Thus, improving safe, accessible storage is a key part of helping reclaimers keep more value from the materials they recover. Better on-site infrastructure or safe local storage could help reclaimers protect their materials, reduce losses from theft or rain damage and negotiate better prices for larger loads.

The baseline survey responses indicate that prices for recyclables fluctuate frequently, often without clear explanation or prior notice. Reclaimers described price changes as unpredictable, noting that sudden drops are a constant challenge for planning and income security. When asked where they learn about current prices, the majority reported relying on scrapyard owners, buy-back centres, or middlemen, with information usually shared informally when they arrive to sell. Very few reclaimers have access to reliable or transparent price information in advance, which puts them in a weak negotiating position. A small number said they check prices by word of mouth from other reclaimers or by comparing buyers; but overall, price information remains inconsistent and highly dependent on trust and personal relationships. This highlights a major gap that integration efforts could address by providing clearer, more regular, communication about pricing to help reclaimers secure fairer deals for their materials.

Across the entire district, reclaimers earn an average of R3,047.92 per month from selling recyclables. This was calculated for all reclaimers who provided income data. If a respondent reported their average monthly income directly, this figure was used as the primary source. If respondents did not report a monthly average but rather a weekly income, this was converted to an estimated monthly income by multiplying their weekly figure by 4.3 (the approximate average number of weeks per month). If respondents did not report monthly or weekly figures but did report daily income, their daily average was converted to an estimated monthly income using the actual average of 5.62 working days per week, the average working days reported by respondents, multiplied by 4.3 weeks — equivalent to about 24.17 working days per month.

In addition, the survey shows that nearly nine in ten reclaimers depend on reclaiming as their main source of income, with very limited options for alternative livelihoods. A small number reported occasional piece jobs, informal trading, or support from family members; but these are exceptions rather than the norm. Fewer than 15% of reclaimers reported having any other source of income, showing that, for most, reclaiming is the foundation of household survival. However, about two-thirds of respondents reported receiving a social grant, which provides an important supplement to their earnings (see Figure 10). Among those who receive grants, the largest share gets either child support or care dependency grants, a crucial but modest boost to household income. Some reclaimers receive the Old Age Grant. Yet they continue reclaiming to top up this income because the grant alone is insufficient to meet basic needs. A very small number reported accessing the Disability Grant, although this is likely rare due to the difficulty of qualifying while still doing

physically demanding informal work. These findings highlight that while social grants are an essential safety net, they remain inadequate on their own and must be seen as part of a broader livelihood strategy that still depends heavily on reclaiming. This underscores the need for support measures that recognise reclaiming as essential work, address the lack of other income opportunities and ensure reclaimers can access grants reliably alongside better support for their reclaiming activities. It also highlights the vulnerability and lack of a social safety net for those reclaimers who did not qualify for social grants, like foreign nationals, who may require other forms of support in order to maintain a basic livelihood.

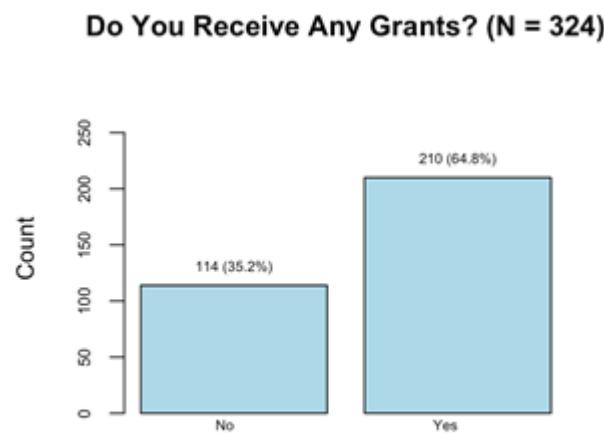


Figure 10: Percentage of reclaimers receiving a social grant.

Next, the data shows significant variation in average monthly income across different sites in the GSDM, highlighting how local waste flows, site conditions and access to materials shape reclaimers' earning potential. Overall, Ermelo Dumpsite and Standerton Dumpsite stand out as the highest-earning sites, with average monthly incomes of ZAR 8,411.04 and ZAR 8,017.90, respectively (see Table 1). This suggests that these larger formal dumpsites offer more consistent and higher-volume waste streams, enabling reclaimers to stockpile larger loads and secure better prices from bulk buyers. However, debrief interviews with data collectors also suggested that a number of the reclaimers within this site also serve as middlemen, buying material from their fellow reclaimers for later resale, skewing their income data higher than for those just reclaiming.

Table 1: Average monthly income by sample site

Sample Site	Final Monthly Income
Ermelo Dumpsite	8411.04
Standerton Dumpsite	8017.90
Secunda Kerbside	3760.00
Dundonald Mall	3600.00
Morgenzon Dumpsite	3600.00
Secunda Dumpsite	3465.57
Grootvlei Dumpsite	3375.00
Ermelo Kerbside	2618.33
Mpuluzi Dumpsite	2250.00
Volkrust Kerbside	2164.55
Mkhondo Dumpsite	2087.00
Leandra Dumpsite	1957.69
Breyten Dumpsite	1925.00
Mpuluzi Kerbside	1903.10
Morgenzon Kerbside	1750.00
Volksrust Dumpsite	1741.47
Davel Kerbside	1733.33
Grelingstad Dumpsite	733.33
Chrissiesmeer Kerbside	725.00

Bethal Dumpsite	526.11
Amsterdam Dumpsite	—
Elukwatini Dumpsite	—
Emanzana Dumpsite	—

In contrast, kerbside sites like Secunda Kerbside, Ermelo Kerbside and smaller street-based routes such as Volkrust Kerbside and Davel Kerbside show much lower average earnings typically ranging between ZAR 1,700 and ZAR 3,700 per month. This aligns with the reality that kerbside reclaimers often work with lighter, cleaner materials like cardboard, PET and cans, but have limited capacity to transport or store large loads and may face more competition from other reclaimers or formal recycling collection services. Mid-range sites like Secunda Dumpsite (ZAR 3,465.57) and Grootvlei Dumpsite (ZAR 3,375.00) demonstrate that even larger dumpsites can produce moderate earnings, depending on local waste flows and gatekeeping dynamics. Smaller rural dumpsites and low-density kerbside sites — such as Mpuluzi Dumpsite, Leandra Dumpsite and Volksrust Dumpsite — show lower average incomes between ZAR 1,700 and ZAR 2,200 per month, reflecting the challenges of limited local waste generation and greater transport costs to reach buy-back centres.

A few sites stand out for particularly low verified income levels, such as Greylingstad Dumpsite (ZAR 733.33), Chrissiesmeer Kerbside (ZAR 725.00) and Bethal Dumpsite, where the average monthly income is just ZAR 526.11. These sites likely offer limited quantities of recyclable material, are more isolated from reliable markets, or are used by reclaimers as secondary sites when other opportunities are scarce. Finally, it is noteworthy that for some sites — including Amsterdam Dumpsite, Elukwatini Dumpsite and Emanzana Dumpsite — verified income data were not available. Reclaimers in these sites declined to provide information on their income. Overall, this site-level breakdown suggests that reclaimers' income opportunities vary widely based on site size, material quality, distance to buyers, and storage or transport constraints. These patterns reinforce the need for targeted support that accounts for local realities, helping reclaimers at low-income sites to strengthen their position through better market access, fair pricing and improved material recovery conditions.

In addition, correlations within the data suggest that several other factors may impact earnings. First, based on estimates, male reclaimers earn an average final monthly income of ZAR 4,036.57, while female reclaimers earn an average of ZAR 2,486.61. This means that, on average, men earn approximately 62.33% more than women in this sample, despite being a minority of respondents. While both men and women participate actively in reclaiming, women tend to cluster at the lower end of the income range. This difference highlights a significant gender disparity in income among

reclaimers and may point to differences in access to materials, market opportunities, or working conditions that could be further explored. Addressing this disparity will require more than just technical support; integration plans must be intentional about gender equity and the specific needs of women reclaimers.

Age is another important dimension of livelihood variation. The analysis shows that reclaimers' average income tends to increase with age, peaking among those in the 41–50 and 51–60-year age brackets. Younger reclaimers, particularly those under 30, generally report lower monthly earnings. This pattern likely reflects the cumulative benefits of experience — seasoned reclaimers build trusted relationships with buyers, know where and when to access the best materials and develop more effective working strategies over time. It also points to the need for skills transfer and mentoring opportunities for younger or newer reclaimers to strengthen their earning capacity.

Education level appears to play a modest but meaningful role in reclaimers' income levels. Those who have completed high school or have some form of post-secondary education tend to report slightly higher mean and median monthly earnings than those with only some high school or no formal schooling at all (see Table 2). While the effect is not strictly linear, it suggests that education may enhance a reclainer's ability to negotiate fair prices, understand market dynamics, or engage more effectively with formal actors. Although a handful of reclaimers possessed university degrees, they are such a minority within the sample that it is difficult to infer the impact of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees on income.

Table 2: Education level and average monthly income

Education Level	Average Final Monthly Income (ZAR)
Postgraduate	5,000.00
Undergraduate	2,114.29
Completed high school	5,342.27
Some high school	2,965.73

Primary	2,108.24
None	2,642.12
Other	2,000.00

Finally, years of experience reclaiming have a clear positive relationship with income. Reclaimers who have been working for 16–20 years report the highest average and median monthly incomes. This demonstrates that reclaiming is not only a survivalist activity for many, but a career built on long-term skill, networks and site knowledge. On the whole, these results indicate that reclaiming in the GSDM is deeply stratified by location, gender, age, nationality, education and experience. Addressing these inequities requires tailored interventions that build on reclaimers' diverse needs and strengths while advancing fairer, more inclusive, livelihoods across the district. In pursuance of these outcomes, integration plans should recognise reclaimers' experience as a vital asset and support them to retain and share their knowledge while improving their working conditions.

6.6. Challenges and Barriers

This baseline survey confirms that reclaimers across the GSDM face multiple overlapping challenges that make their work precarious, unsafe and poorly rewarded (see Figure 11). Low income is the single biggest issue, reported by 284 reclaimers (87.7%), with people describing how fluctuating prices, low payments and exploitation keep earnings well below a living wage. Almost the same share cited as challenges safety (87%) and lack of personal protective equipment PPE (87%), with many reclaimers working in dangerous conditions without basic protective equipment. Around 79% struggle with lack of storage space, while 78% face barriers to transport, both of which limit how much recyclable material they can collect and sell. Weather conditions were noted as hazards by 76.5%, while 74% highlighted health risks, underlining the toll that harsh conditions, exposure to waste and lack of services take on reclaimers' bodies. Access to recyclables remains a daily barrier for 226 reclaimers (69.8%), with many having cited competition, gatekeeping and insufficient separation at source. Social issues also dominate the recycling landscape: 67% pointed to stigma, 65% reported harassment and 42% specifically mentioned intimidation by police or bylaw enforcement as challenges. Finally, poor site infrastructure remains a persistent concern:

64.5% said they have no toilets, 56.5% lack access to water, and 55% have no shade or shelter when working long hours' outdoors.

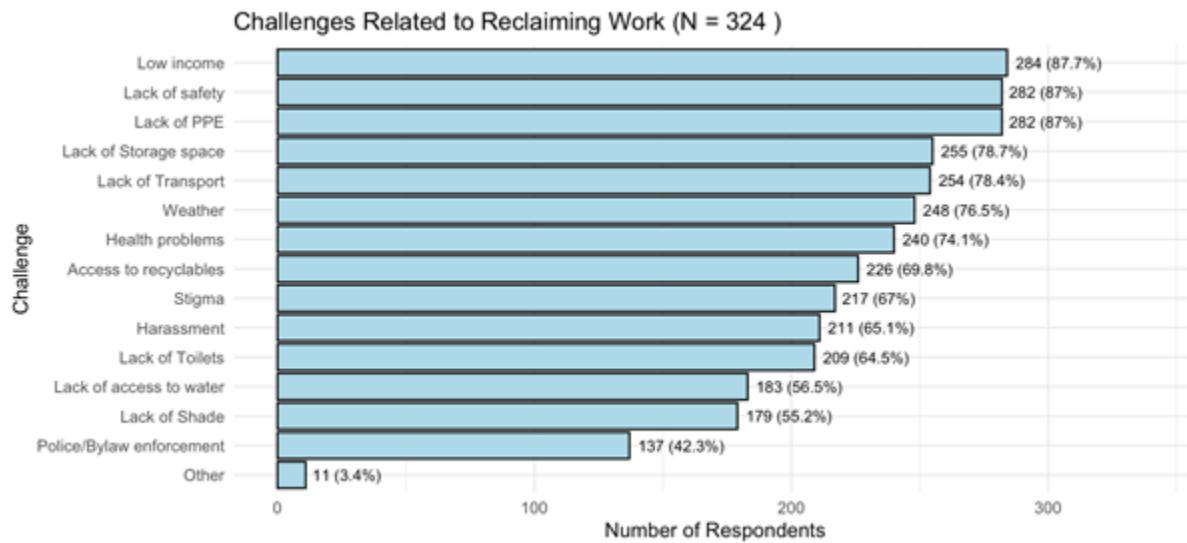


Figure 11: Challenges identified by respondents

Turning to specific challenges, the results highlight significant gaps in the use by reclaimers of basic safety equipment. Worryingly, the largest single group — 153 respondents — reported that they do not use any safety equipment at all (see Figure 12). This is slightly higher than the number who reported using gloves (152 respondents), which is the most commonly used type of PPE. Other forms of PPE are used by an even smaller proportion of reclaimers. 124 respondents reported using masks, while 122 use boots. Reflective vests are the least commonly used, with only 48 respondents indicating that they wear them. These figures suggest that while some reclaimers take steps to protect themselves, many work without consistent or comprehensive protective gear.

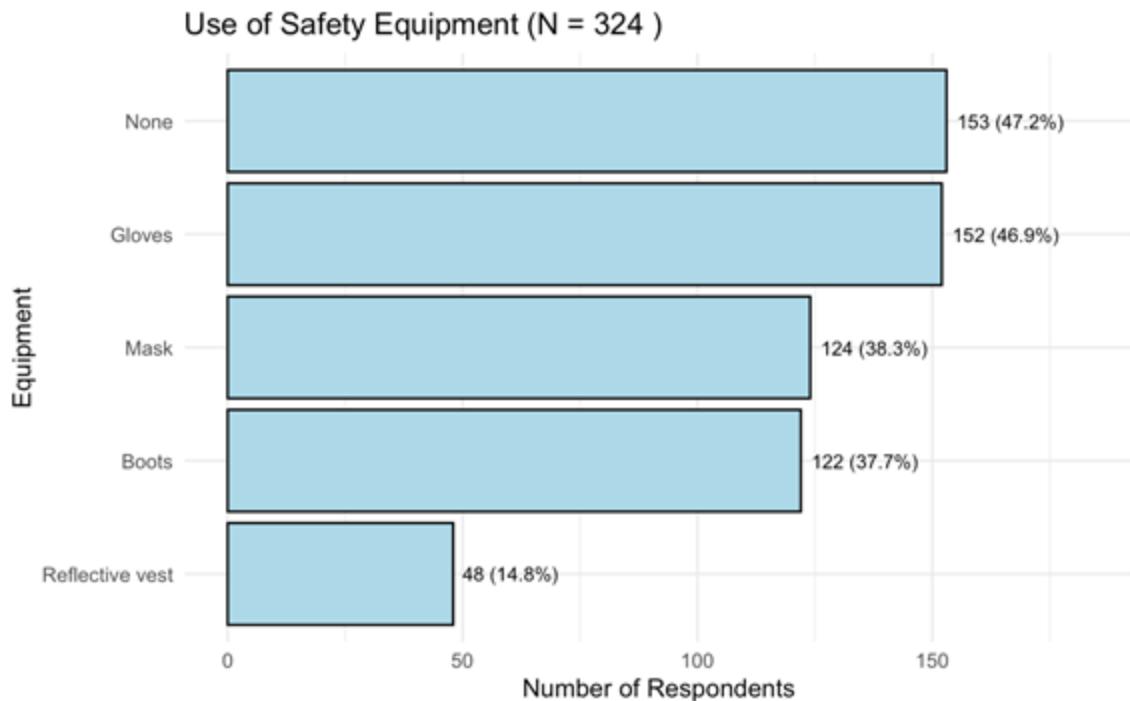


Figure 12: Use of personal protective equipment (PPE)

Reclaimers reported lack of PPE as a significant daily challenge across almost all sites. At many sites — including major dumpsites like Secunda and kerbside routes in Ermelo — virtually every reclaimer mentioned they have no access to protective equipment. This confirms that safety remains a key gap, especially for reclaimers working on kerbside routes and smaller informal sites who often lack even the most basic gear. The few sites with lower reporting, such as the Standerton Dumpsite, may reflect local differences in buy-back centre relationships or informal PPE support; but overall, the need for better access to protective equipment is consistent across the district. This limited use of PPE exposes reclaimers to avoidable risks, including injuries, respiratory problems and accidents. The high proportion of reclaimers not using any equipment reflects barriers such as the cost of PPE, lack of awareness and absence of structured support. Improving access to safety equipment and raising awareness of its importance are key areas where municipal or organisational support could make a significant difference to reclaimers' working conditions and overall health.

As noted above, 74% of respondents noted experiencing work-related health problems. When asked about specific health issues, 67% of reclaimers reported cuts, making this the most common work-related injury (see Figure 13). These cuts are often a result of handling sharp metal, broken glass and other hazardous materials without protective gloves. Cuts are especially prevalent at large dumpsites like Secunda Dumpsite, Bethal Dumpsite and Mpuluzi Kerbside, where reclaimers sort through mixed, unsorted waste for long hours. Reclaimers who work mainly at landfills reported the highest counts of cuts, with over 100 individuals indicating they suffer cuts regularly. Smaller but busy kerbside clusters, such as Ermelo Kerbside, also reported frequent cuts. Breathing

problems are the second most common health issue, affecting about 45% of reclaimers. These are more likely among reclaimers working on kerbside routes, where they are exposed to dust, vehicle fumes and burning piles of waste. For example, many reclaimers in Ermelo Kerbside, Secunda Kerbside and mixed urban work routes reported persistent coughing and shortness of breath.

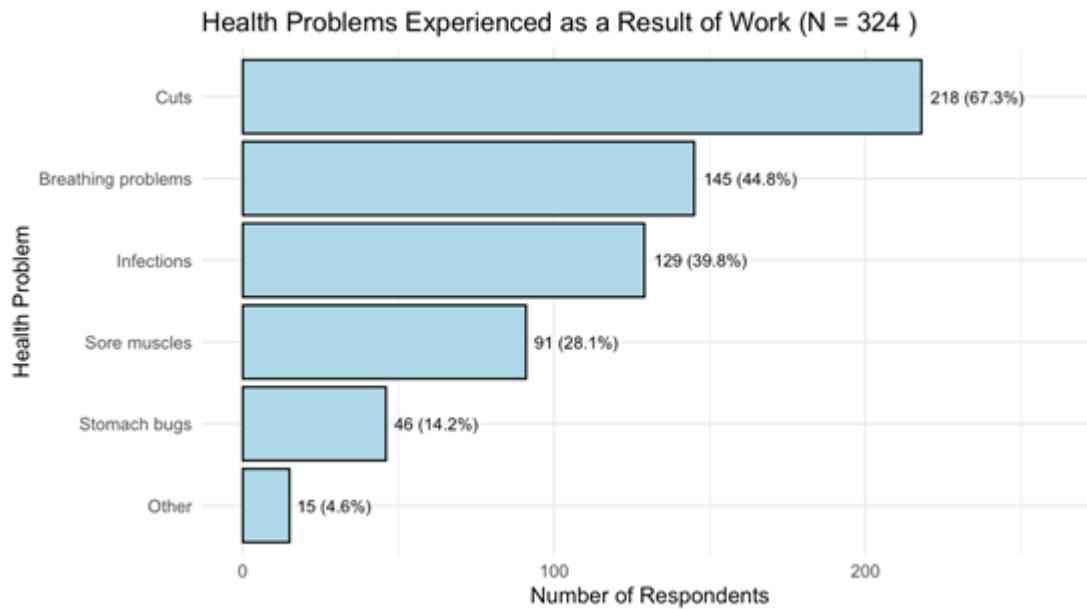


Figure 13: Health issues experienced by reclaimers

Infections, reported by 40%, are linked to repeated cuts, dirty work environments and lack of basic hygiene facilities. Again, these appear more frequently among reclaimers who spend long hours sorting in unregulated or less formal sites where there is no access to clean water or proper waste separation. Sore muscles, affecting 28%, are widespread among reclaimers who push or pull heavy trolleys along kerbside routes and town streets, often for many kilometres per day. This type of strain is reported across both large dumpsites and kerbside clusters but is more common in areas where reclaimers rely on manual carts instead of vehicles. Stomach bugs were noted by 14% of reclaimers, mostly those working in dumpsites without toilets or access to clean drinking water. Other health complaints (4.6%) include headaches, stress-related conditions and general fatigue from working long hours in harsh conditions. These results confirm that reclaimers face daily health hazards that differ depending on where they work and what materials they handle. Any effort to integrate reclaimers must include practical measures to reduce these risks: providing PPE like gloves and masks, ensuring safe sorting areas and improving access to water, toilets, and basic medical care on-site.

On-site infrastructure, or the lack of infrastructure, directly impacts worker health and safety. As noted, more than 76% of reclaimers described weather conditions as a challenge, a natural barrier to work that largely occurs outdoors, but which also indicates a lack of shelter and shade at dumpsites. In addition, the survey shows that access to basic facilities like clean water and toilets

remains extremely limited for reclaimers in the GSDM. Stark gender and site-level disparities define access. Overall, just over half the respondents (53%) reported having access to clean water during work, while 47% do not (see Figure 14). Although this suggests that a slight majority has some level of provision, the fact that nearly half of all reclaimers still work without reliable access to clean water poses serious risks for hygiene, hydration and their general health. Site-level data show that access is highly uneven. Only a handful of sites reported any reclaimers having access to clean water. Notable examples include Mpuluzi Kerbside, where 62 reclaimers said they have access, and Ermelo Kerbside, where 24 reclaimers have access. Other sites like Secunda Dumpsite (18), Standerton Dumpsite (9) and smaller sites such as Davel Kerbside, Dundonald Mall and Volksrust Dumpsite also show limited water provision. However, the majority of dumpsites and kerbside collection areas do not have adequate facilities, placing the burden on reclaimers to find water elsewhere or make do without it.

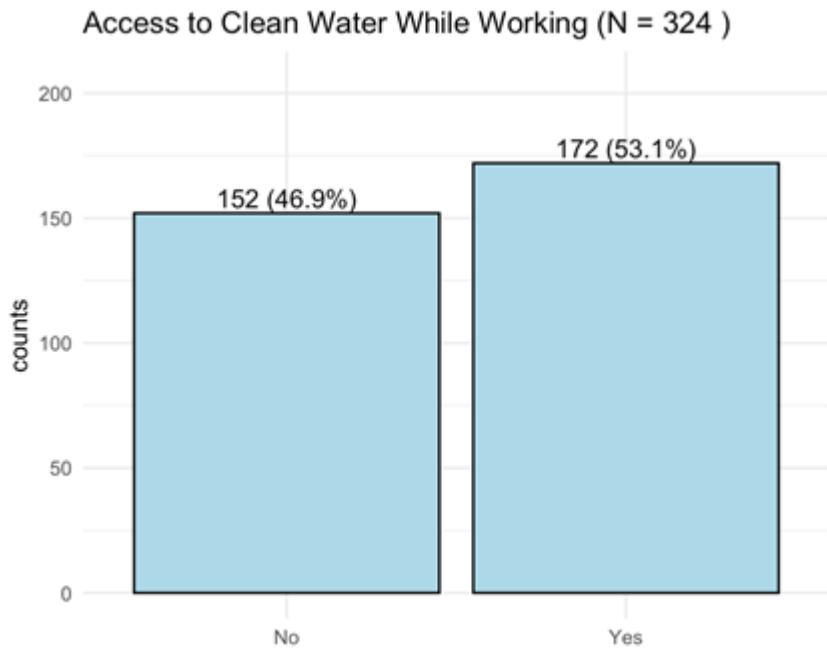


Figure 14: Access to clean water while working

Access to toilets is even more constrained, with 69% of reclaimers (225 respondents) reporting no access to toilets during work, compared to only 31% (99 respondents) who said they do have access (see Figure 15). This lack of sanitation infrastructure not only undermines basic health and dignity but also exposes reclaimers to risks of infection, especially those working long hours in informal environments with no nearby alternatives. Among female reclaimers, 69.6% do not have access to toilets, while 30.4% do. Among male reclaimers, 69.0% lack access, while 31.0% do. Although the percentages are similar, the absolute number of women without safe, private toilets is higher, reinforcing the gendered nature of this challenge. Women are likely to face greater health and

safety risks without access to proper sanitation, including exposure to harassment or gender-based violence.

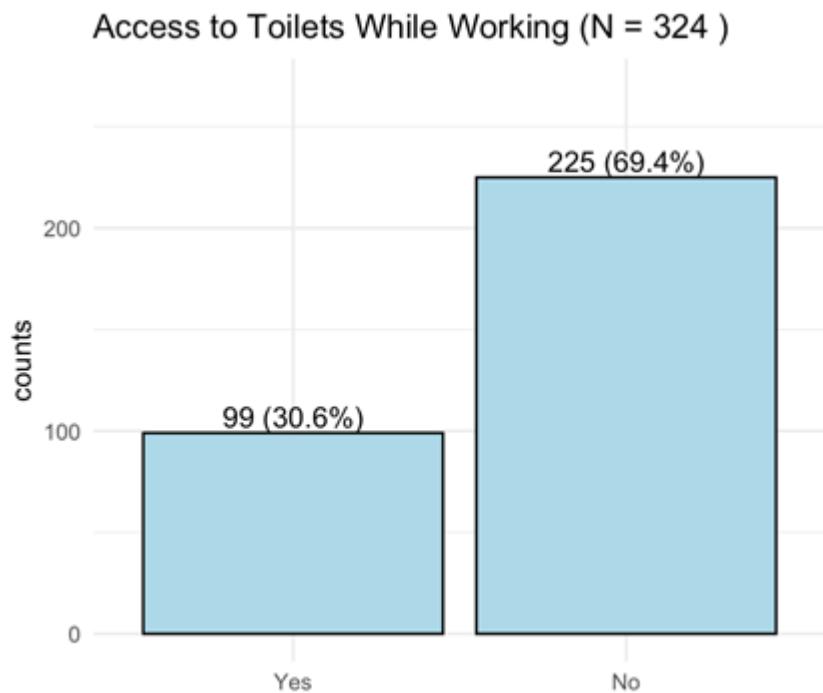


Figure 15: Access to toilets while working

Overall, reclaimers working at formal dumpsites are slightly more likely to have some access to toilets, though their quality and availability are often poor. Kerbside reclaimers, who make up a large share of the workforce, are least likely to have any access at all, forcing them to use unsafe or undignified alternatives while working long hours on the streets. This finding was confirmed by the review of IWMPs and interviews with PROs, ARO and SAWPA.

A small number of dumpsites provide some toilet access for reclaimers. Bethal Dumpsite recorded 18 respondents with access and Secunda Dumpsite had 14. Other sites with limited access include Standerton Dumpsite, Volksrust Dumpsite and Dundonald Mall. However, the majority of sites reported no reclaimers having access to toilets at all. These findings highlight that basic service provision — including clean water and safe, accessible toilets — remains an area in urgent need of improvement if reclaimers are to be supported and integrated into the formal waste management system in line with national guidelines. The gendered nature of inadequate sanitation must also be addressed, ensuring that women reclaimers have safe, private, facilities to maintain their health and dignity. Sites that already show some positive provision could offer useful lessons for scaling up access at other locations, with stronger municipal investment and partnerships with relevant stakeholders

Lastly, the stigmatisation and harassment of waste pickers have been a common concern of scholarship in South Africa and globally, with numerous studies highlighting how reclaimers face daily discrimination, social exclusion and policing that undermine their livelihoods. This body of research consistently shows that stigma not only affects reclaimers' dignity and safety but also limits their ability to secure fair prices, safe working conditions and formal recognition for their environmental contributions. Within the GSDM, 67% of reclaimers reported being stigmatised for their work. 65% reported experiencing harassment, with multiple sources of harassment contributing to unsafe or hostile working conditions (see Figure 16). Moreover, harassment is not confined to a single type of site, though informal sites and kerbside routes appear to present more opportunities for harassment due to their visibility and mobility.

Other reclaimers were reported as a source of harassment by 113 respondents, making them the most frequently cited group. This suggests that competition over materials, conflicts over territories, or disputes within informal networks can create tensions and conflicts among reclaimers themselves. The community was identified by 111 respondents as a source of harassment, highlighting strained relationships with local residents who may perceive reclaimers as trespassers, nuisances, or stigmatise their work. Municipalities were reported as a source of harassment by 101 respondents, which points to issues such as by-law enforcement, evictions from work sites, confiscation of materials, or mistreatment by officials and law enforcement. This underscores the urgent need for improved municipal engagement and support to protect reclaimers' rights and working conditions. A small number of respondents cited private companies (13 respondents) and security personnel (2 respondents) as sources of harassment. These relatively low numbers may still be significant, as they reflect the vulnerability reclaimers face when working near commercial or industrial sites patrolled by private security who may prevent access to recyclables or forcibly remove them from areas.

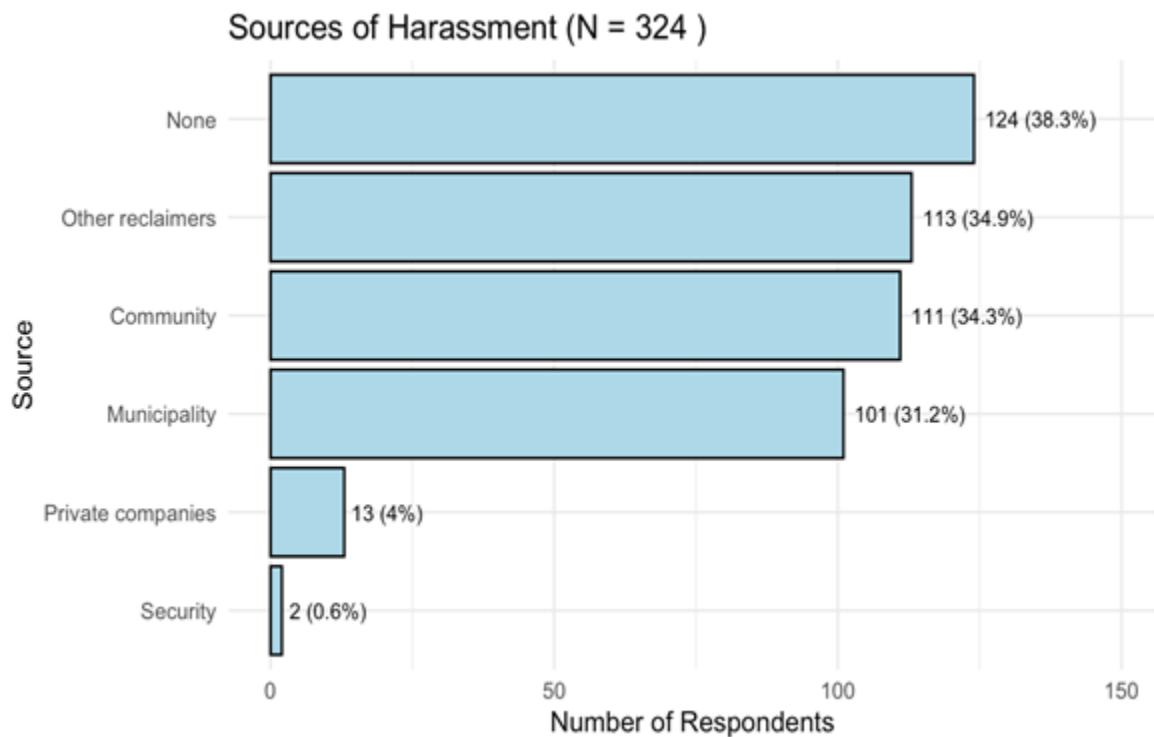


Figure 16: Sources of harassment

Notably, 124 respondents indicated that they do not face harassment from any of these sources. This suggests that while harassment is widespread, some reclaimers do work under relatively stable and supportive conditions. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that harassment is deeply embedded in the working environment of reclaimers, arising from both formal actors (municipalities, private security) and informal networks (other reclaimers, communities). Interventions to reduce harassment must therefore address multiple levels: building awareness and understanding within communities; establishing clear agreements with municipalities and private companies; and supporting reclaimer organisations to strengthen internal cooperation and resolve conflicts. Addressing these challenges will be essential to creating a safer, more dignified, working environment and ensuring that reclaimers can continue to contribute to waste diversion and recycling efforts without fear of intimidation or exploitation.

In sum, each of these overlapping barriers confirm that reclaimers work under highly precarious conditions. They reinforce the urgent need for practical improvements — from fairer prices and secure storage, to better site services and protection from harassment — for reclaiming to become safer, more stable and more dignified work.

6.7. Relationships with Municipalities

In South Africa, municipalities are constitutionally and legislatively mandated to provide waste management services within their jurisdictions, which includes the planning, collection, transportation and disposal of household and commercial waste. These responsibilities mean that local governments play a critical role in shaping how reclaimers are treated and supported in the waste management system. Under the Waste Picker Integration Guidelines, municipalities now have a clear obligation to actively recognise, include and support waste pickers as key stakeholders in local recycling and waste diversion efforts. The guidelines call for municipalities to move beyond seeing reclaimers as informal or marginal actors. They are required to put in place enabling practical measures — such as registration systems, infrastructure, fair access to waste and protection from harassment — for reclaimers to work safely and more securely as part of the formal waste management system.

The baseline findings show that direct communication and engagement between reclaimers and local municipal officials is extremely limited across the GSDM. This challenge was echoed in interviews with PROs, ARO and SAWPA. Only 48 reclaimers, representing roughly 15% of respondents, reported that they work or communicate with municipal officials in any way (see Figure 17). In contrast, the vast majority — 276 reclaimers, or 85% — indicated they have no contact or working relationship with municipal structures.

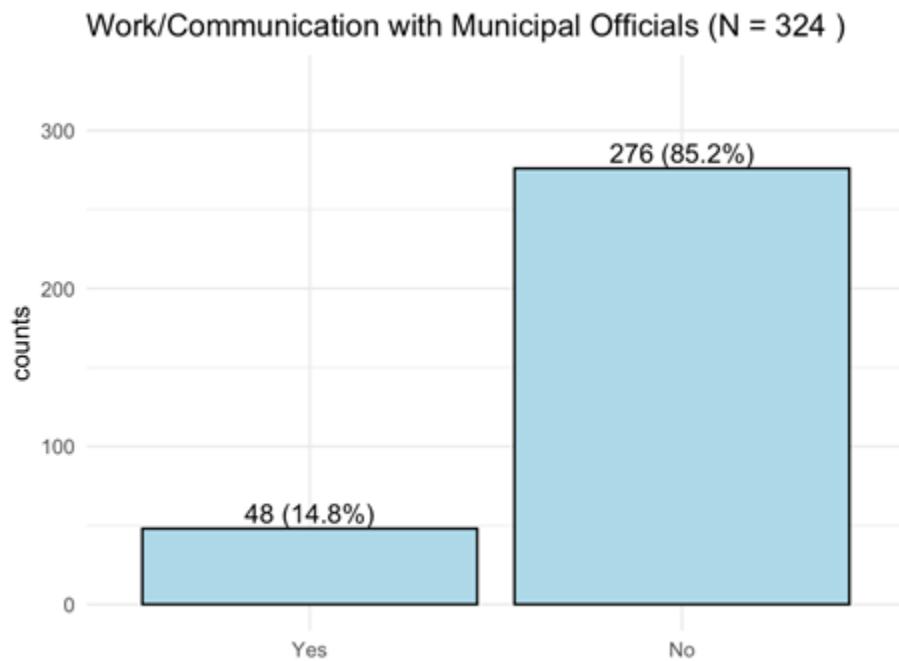


Figure 17: Communication with municipal officials

Disaggregating this by local municipality highlights significant variation in levels of engagement. Msukaligwa and Lekwa Local Municipalities show slightly stronger communication channels, with 26 reclaimers in Msukaligwa and 9 in Lekwa reporting some communication with officials. Other municipalities show negligible or non-existent levels of engagement: in Chief Albert Luthuli, for example, only 2 reclaimers reported any communication, while 90 reported none. Dipaleseng and Mkhondo recorded no communication at all, while Govan Mbeki and Dr. Pixley Isaka Ka Seme recorded minimal engagement. In terms of where reclaimers work, those working on larger or more centralised sites are more likely to have some form of regular communication with municipal officials, while others on scattered kerbside routes often do not. This lack of communication may reinforce feelings of neglect and hinder the implementation of waste picker integration plans responsive to local contexts. Moreover, the unevenness of communication across sites points to missed opportunities for consistent dialogue and trust-building between reclaimers and local government.

When asked how they would describe their relationship with the municipality, the majority of reclaimers painted a bleak picture. Over 70% described this relationship as either “very negative” or “negative”, with 122 reclaimers saying it was very negative and a further 119 saying negative (see Figure 18). In stark contrast, only four reclaimers described the relationship as “positive” and just one as “very positive”, highlighting how rare constructive working relationships currently are. Another 37 (11%) described the relationship as neutral, while 41 (13%) said they were unsure, suggesting a sense of disconnection or lack of engagement with municipal officials. Overall, these results show that many reclaimers feel overlooked, undervalued, or even antagonised by their local municipalities — a clear barrier to building meaningful trust and delivering the support that reclaimers need.

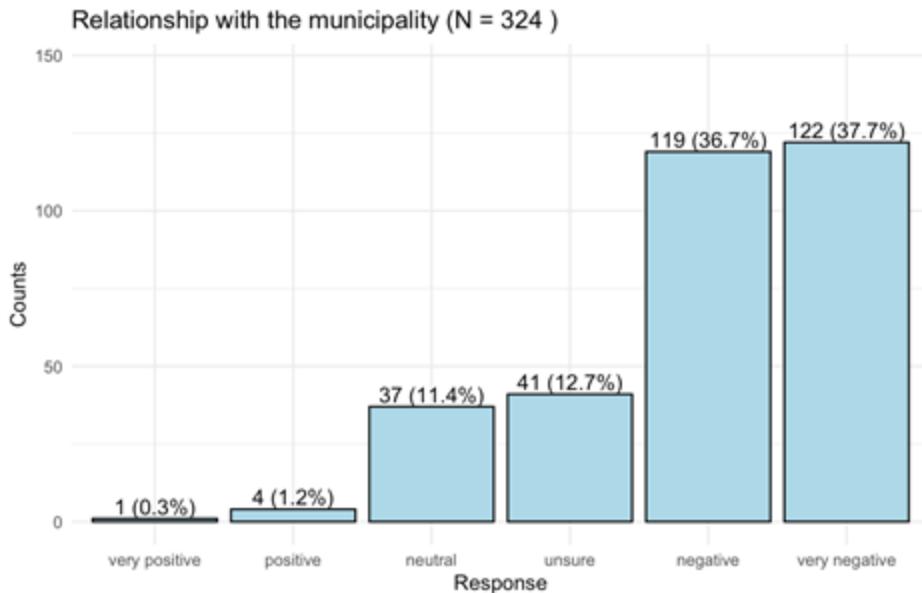


Figure 18: Reclaimers feelings on their relationship with their municipality

Breaking these findings down by local municipality shows that poor relationships are widespread but vary in their severity. Chief Albert Luthuli recorded the highest number of very negative responses (33 reclaimers) and negative responses (31 reclaimers), with no reclaimers reporting a positive relationship. However, 20 described it as neutral, suggesting that some see room for improvement. In Govan Mbeki, dissatisfaction was just as stark, with 44 reclaimers describing the relationship as very negative and 40 as negative, while positive or neutral responses were almost non-existent. Respondents in Dr. Pixley Isaka Ka Seme echoed this trend, with all reclaimers describing the relationship as very negative or negative and none describing it as positive or neutral. Msukaligwa stood out for its unusually high number of reclaimers who said they were “unsure” (31 reclaimers) — the highest in the district — suggesting a lack of clear interaction or understanding of the municipality’s role. In the same municipality, 11 reclaimers described the relationship as very negative and 13 as negative, while only one reclaimer described it as positive. Lekwa was the only municipality with any notable positive responses: three reclaimers described the relationship as positive and one as very positive, while six described it as negative and one as very negative, indicating mixed experiences. Dipaleseng showed moderate dissatisfaction, with ten reclaimers describing the relationship as negative. None described it as very negative or positive. Mkhondo had a strongly negative pattern, with 18 reclaimers describing the relationship as very negative and four as negative. There were no positive or neutral responses at all. Reclaimers’ perceptions of their relationship with the municipality differ markedly across sites. Those working on formal landfills and recognised dumpsites tend to report a more neutral or sometimes positive relationship, likely reflecting more frequent contact with municipal staff at these sites. In contrast, reclaimers working at kerbside or informal sites often characterise their

relationship as negative or non-existent — an important signal that efforts to integrate reclaimers need to bridge this gap between kerbside reclaimers and their municipalities

Taken together, these findings highlight a deep trust gap between reclaimers and local government structures in the GSDM. Many reclaimers feel excluded from waste management decision-making, lack consistent channels for raising concerns, and see few opportunities for genuine dialogue or support. If municipalities are serious about implementing the national Waste Picker Integration Guidelines, they must prioritise building trust and improving relationships with reclaimers. This means recognising reclaimers' contributions, addressing conflicts and harassment, creating opportunities for meaningful engagement and providing practical support that responds to reclaimers' actual needs. The baseline results make clear that without stronger, more respectful and supportive local partnerships, meaningful waste picker integration will remain out of reach.

Lastly, the data clearly indicate that most reclaimers in the district feel that they receive little to no tangible support from their local municipalities. Across all respondents, it is striking that 300 reclaimers — or 92.6% of the total sample — reported not receiving any form of support at all from the municipality (see Figure 19). Where support is reported, it remains sparse and largely intangible. The most frequently mentioned form of assistance — meetings with the municipality — was noted by only 15 reclaimers, representing just 4.6% of the sample. Other forms of practical support were even less common: just 12 reclaimers (3.7%) reported receiving any personal protective equipment (PPE); only 6 reclaimers (1.9%) had received training; and support for transport or storage was each reported by just 4 reclaimers (1.2%). Assistance with registration on the South African Waste Picker Registration System (SAWPRS), baling equipment, or help with purchasing materials was each reported by only 3 reclaimers (0.9%). Just 2 reclaimers (0.6%) mentioned receiving any other form of support. A breakdown by municipality confirms the same pattern: Chief Albert Luthuli, Govan Mbeki and Msukaligwa Local Municipalities recorded the largest numbers of reclaimers reporting no support at all.

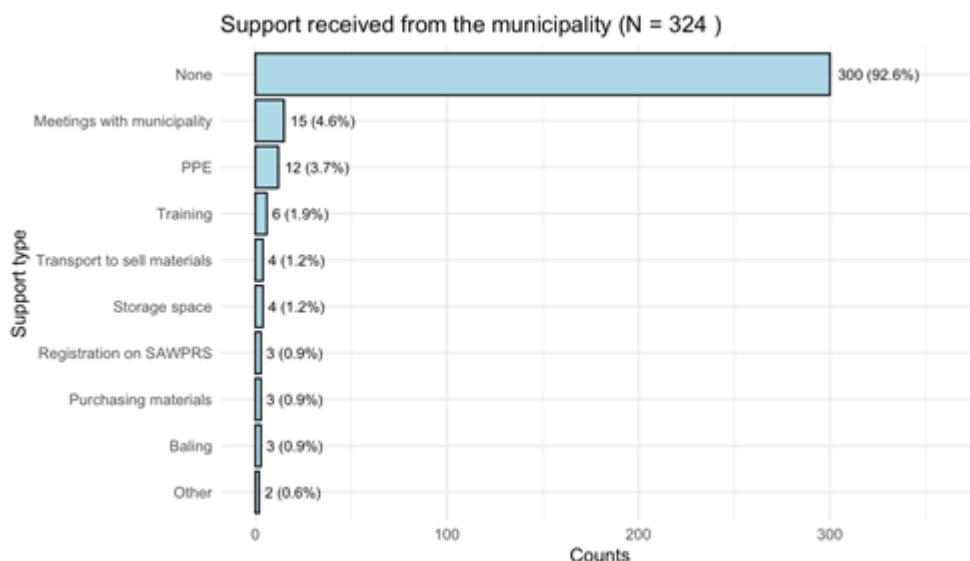


Figure 19: Support received from the municipality

These figures highlight that, despite reclaimers' vital role in local recycling and waste diversion, the vast majority continue to work alone, without even the most basic municipal or industry support needed to make their work safer and more secure. They reveal a clear disconnect between local governments and reclaimers who are providing essential waste diversion and recycling services within their communities. Most reclaimers work in conditions of high risk and vulnerability without formal recognition, practical support, or meaningful engagement with the municipalities whose waste management systems they help to sustain. If municipalities are to align with national waste picker integration guidelines, improving structured and consistent communication with reclaimers must be a priority. Furthermore, municipal support should go beyond occasional meetings or once-off PPE handouts to include practical interventions such as safe storage spaces, reliable transport, access to training and registration systems and ongoing dialogue to address reclaimers' needs and contributions. Building these relationships and support structures will be crucial for ensuring that reclaimers are fairly integrated into local waste management systems and their vital economic and environmental roles are strengthened rather than undermined.

6.8. Opportunities for Support

When asked what forms of support would help improve their work, reclaimers across the GSDM identified clear, practical priorities that highlight the challenges they face on the ground. The most commonly requested forms of support were access to secure storage space, mentioned by 294 reclaimers (90.7%), personal protective equipment (PPE) (289 reclaimers, 89.2%) and transport to sell materials (289 reclaimers, 89.2%) (see Figure 20). These needs highlight the daily realities of reclaiming: without safe storage, materials can be stolen or damaged; without PPE, reclaimers face significant health and safety risks; and without affordable, reliable transport, getting recyclables to market is both costly and physically demanding. Other widely mentioned forms of support include help with purchasing materials (245 reclaimers, 75.6%), registration on the South African Waste Picker Registration System (SAWPRS) (222 reclaimers, 68.5%), regular meetings with the municipality (211 reclaimers, 65.1%), baling facilities (198 reclaimers, 61.1%), and training opportunities (193 reclaimers, 59.6%). These priorities reflect a clear desire for more stable income streams, formal recognition, better communication with local authorities and the chance to add value to collected recyclables through improved skills and processing. Very few reclaimers said they needed no support at all. Only 7 respondents (2.2%) said "none", indicating that most see multiple opportunities for municipalities and other actors to improve their working conditions and livelihoods. Overall, the findings show that reclaimers know exactly what they need: practical, tangible support to make their daily work safer and more profitable, alongside longer-term measures that strengthen their role in the local recycling economy.

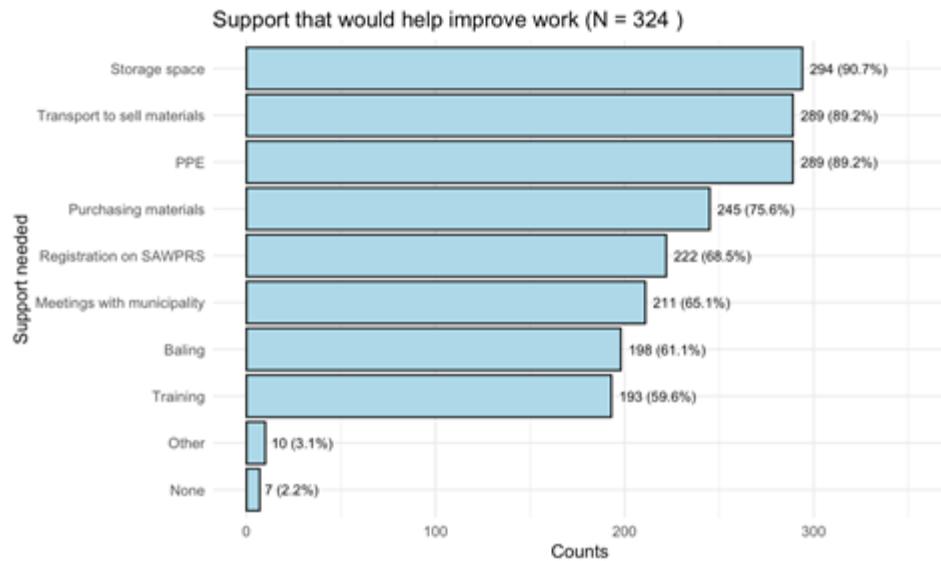


Figure 20: Support that would help improve work

When asked whether they were interested in receiving training to improve their work, a significant majority — 192 reclaimers, or 59.3% of the total sample — said yes, compared to 132 reclaimers, or 40.7%, who said no. This strong interest highlights reclaimers' willingness to build skills that could help them work more safely, add value to recyclables and strengthen their position in the recycling value chain. When asked what kind of training would be most useful, respondents most commonly mentioned waste management training and related skills, with 64 reclaimers (19.8%) specifically noting general waste management, or the need for better sorting techniques, workshops and processing skills. A smaller number mentioned more specialised topics such as plastic or metal processing, financial management, leadership, or communication skills. This indicates that some reclaimers see training not only as a way to improve material handling but also to build broader organisational or business capacities.

Notably, interest in training was high across genders, with both men and women showing eagerness to develop skills that could help them negotiate better prices, process materials more effectively, or even move into new roles within the recycling value chain. When reclaimers were asked about the types of training they would find most useful, the responses highlighted a mix of practical, technical and organisational skills. Reclaimers most frequently requested training on waste management, sorting and material identification. Some also expressed a desire for training that would help them develop their own organisations and advocate more effectively for their rights and needs. These findings reinforce that training and capacity building are not only desired by reclaimers, but are also seen by them as a key pathway to greater stability, safety and income security. Any waste picker integration plan should therefore include a well-structured training programme that is inclusive, locally accessible and co-designed with reclaimers to ensure it meets their diverse needs.

Finally, when asked how they believe they should be integrated into the municipal waste management system, reclaimers in the GSDM highlighted a strong desire for formal recognition, direct involvement in decision-making and practical opportunities to lead their own work. The most widely supported idea was for reclaimers to be included in planning meetings and decision-making processes, mentioned by 311 respondents, or 96.0% of the total sample — a clear sign that reclaimers want a seat at the table to shape policies that affect their livelihoods. Many reclaimers also called for tangible measures to strengthen their working conditions and role in the recycling economy (see Figure 21). 293 respondents (90.4%) supported the establishment of reclaimer-led Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs), while 292 (90.1%) said they should be provided with official identification, which would help formalise their status and reduce harassment or barriers when accessing recyclables. 289 reclaimers (89.2%) called for better access to landfills and municipal waste sites, reflecting their reliance on these sites as sources of income and the need for secure, fair access.

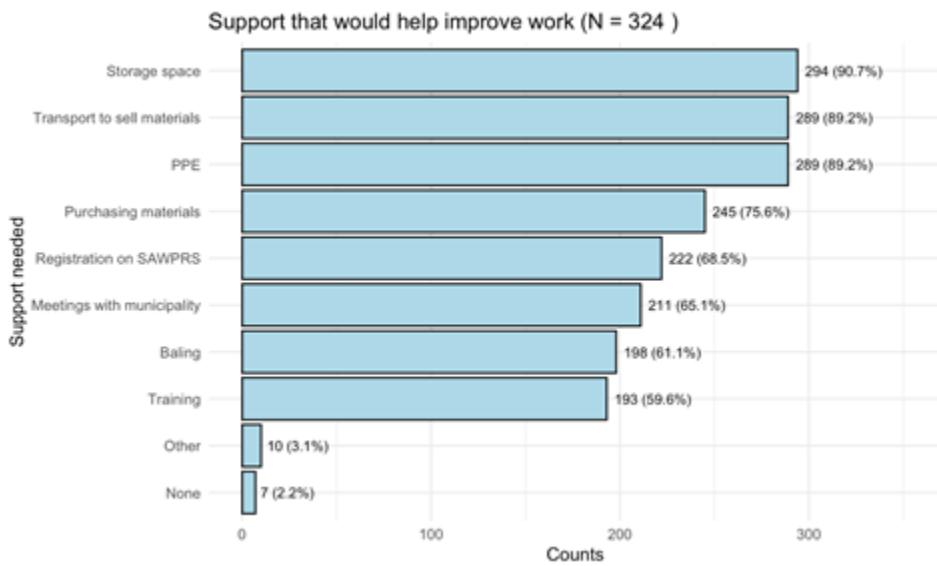


Figure 21: Support that would help improve work

Organising reclaimers is also a priority: 285 respondents (88.0%) said municipalities should support reclaimer organisations, while 284 (87.7%) suggested developing reclaimer-led drop-off sites, giving reclaimers more control over how recyclables are collected and sold. A substantial number — 280 reclaimers (86.4%) — also supported registration on the SAWPRS, showing a clear demand for formalisation and access to national systems that could secure their rights and improve earnings. Additionally, 215 reclaimers (66.4%) wanted municipalities to support reclaimer-led separation at source, recognising that reclaimers have the knowledge and experience to design systems that work on the ground. 212 reclaimers (65.4%) suggested that municipalities should hire waste pickers directly, indicating an appetite for more secure, formal employment opportunities. Only a handful — 6 respondents (1.9%) — suggested other ideas.

These findings demonstrate that reclaimers in the GSDM are not passive actors waiting for support. They have clear, practical ideas for how they should be recognised, supported and given a more active role in local waste management. The most common suggestions reflect a desire for both structural inclusion — having a voice in municipal planning — and practical empowerment to secure access, organise collectively and operate their own facilities. Together, these insights offer municipalities a roadmap: meaningful integration must combine official recognition and decision-making power with real, on-the-ground opportunities to improve reclaimers' working conditions and livelihoods.

6.9. Voices of Reclaimers

The baseline survey confirms just how essential reclaiming is as a livelihood strategy for hundreds of informal waste pickers across the GSDM. The data show that reclaimers work in every local municipality, often moving flexibly between dumpsites, landfills, kerbside routes and informal dumping spots to secure enough recyclable materials to survive. Most work alone, without consistent support, protective equipment, or safe storage. Yet they divert significant volumes of waste from landfill every day. The vast majority earn well below a living wage, with average monthly incomes varying widely depending on site size, location and material flows. Many rely on social grants to make ends meet but have no other income sources beyond reclaiming. The survey also highlights the harsh daily realities reclaimers face: cuts, infections, respiratory problems and muscle strain are widespread. Yet most have no access to basic site services like toilets, water and shelter. Challenges such as low income, theft, harassment, lack of PPE and stigma are pervasive, compounded by weak or non-existent support from local government and private companies.

Despite these barriers, the survey makes clear that reclaimers are highly organised in how they work and know exactly what they need to improve their livelihoods. Reclaimers overwhelmingly called for secure storage space, PPE, affordable transport, fair access to sites and support to formalise their work through registration and reclaimer-led facilities. They want to be included in decision-making and have a clear appetite for training that builds both technical and organisational skills. Yet trust between reclaimers and municipalities remains extremely low: most reclaimers described their relationship with local government as negative or non-existent. Over 90% reported receiving no support at all. If municipalities are serious about fulfilling their mandate under the National Waste Picker Integration Guidelines, this must change. The findings highlight an urgent need for practical, tangible support in the form of safe working conditions, basic infrastructure, fair prices, combined with genuine recognition of reclaimers as partners, not problems. Building trust, improving daily conditions and creating pathways for reclaimers to lead integration efforts

themselves will be critical if the sector is to become safer, more dignified and more sustainable for those who rely on it most.

Beyond the structured survey questions, many reclaimers used the final open-ended section to voice their frustrations, ideas and hopes in their own words. Dozens of respondents shared powerful comments that underline the urgency of being heard and the depth of the challenges they face. Many repeated calls for basic support such as storage space, protective gear and fair prices; others spoke about wanting more respectful treatment from municipal officials and buyers. Some reclaimers raised concerns about corruption, gatekeeping at landfills and fear of losing access to sites altogether if integration is poorly implemented. Others simply asked for recognition: to be treated not as criminals or nuisances, but as workers making a valuable contribution to their communities and the environment. A few reclaimers even expressed gratitude for being asked at all, highlighting how rarely their perspectives are sought out by local government or industry stakeholders. To capture these insights visually, a word cloud of reclaimers' closing comments has been created and is included in the appendix.

These voices remind us that reclaimers are not passive beneficiaries of policy; rather, they are experts in their own livelihoods and daily risks. Meaningful, just, integration will only be possible if reclaimers are included at every stage, from planning to implementation and oversight. Their practical insights, local knowledge and clear ideas for change are the foundation for building waste management systems that are more inclusive, more circular and more resilient. Any future programme or partnership must prioritise reclaimers' voices not just as a box-ticking exercise, but as the basis for decisions that genuinely strengthen their work and well-being.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1. Conclusions

To date, research on reclaimers and reclaimer integration in South Africa has focused on the metropolitan areas. This baseline research report on reclaimer integration in the GSDM is the first comprehensive study of reclaimers and reclaimer integration in a rural district municipality. It found that, despite the distance from the main recycling markets, there is a significant amount of reclaiming activity in the GSDM. In addition, there are a number of innovative integration initiatives designed to increase rural reclaimers' access to markets and improve their incomes and working conditions. It is notable that these projects are led by a reclaimer organisation which has received the bulk of the necessary funding from international donors. While some PROs are active in the GSDM, some PRO representatives noted a desire to begin making more strategic interventions. Although the majority of reclaimers surveyed reported poor relations with the

municipality, ARO has found senior officials highly receptive and keen to support integration. The project research team had a similar experience. There was widespread, strong and enthusiastic participation from municipal officials, reclaimers, the PRO Alliance and NGOs in the July 2025 workshop. All of this bodes well for the potential of GSDM stakeholders to collaboratively develop and implement reclaimer integration in the GSDM. In the interest of advancing this goal, the report concludes by identifying a number of recommendations based on the research findings.

7.2 Recommendations

To advance just and effective reclaimer integration across the GSDM, this baseline study recommends a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach, guided by the principles and processes outlined in the Waste Picker Integration Guideline and the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) Regulations. The following actions items are recommended as priorities:

- 1 **Establish a Gert Sibande District Municipality Reclaimer Integration Committee (GSDM RIC):** The GSDM, together with its local municipalities and relevant stakeholders, should establish a Reclaimer Integration Committee to lead, coordinate and drive reclaimer integration efforts in the district. This committee should follow the Seven Steps for Waste Picker Integration outlined in the national Waste Picker Integration Guideline. The RIC should include representatives from district and local municipal departments (waste management, planning, economic development and community services), the provincial department (DARDLEA), national reclaimer organisations (ARO and SAWPA), active PROs, local industry and producers, NGOs, buyback centres, bakkie collectors, and any other stakeholders identified as relevant by the RIC itself.
- 2 **Develop a GSDM Reclaimer Integration Plan:** Guided by the Seven Steps for Integration, the RIC should collaboratively develop a district-wide Reclaimer Integration Plan. This plan should outline key integration activities, assign responsibilities and propose a multi-year implementation framework. Once finalised, the plan should be formally adopted by the GSDM Council and integrated into the GSDM's IDP and IWMP to ensure alignment with statutory planning processes.
- 3 **Review and revise IDPs and IWMPs to include reclaimer integration:** The RIC should lead a review of existing IDPs and IWMPs across all municipalities in the district. These documents should be revised to include the following: references to national and provincial policy frameworks (including the Waste Picker Integration Guideline, the 2020 National Waste Management Strategy and the EPR Regulations); accurate and disaggregated information about reclaimers and their work locations; and a comprehensive inventory of existing recycling and integration initiatives. To support effective implementation and

monitoring, the GSDM should enforce the use of standardised reporting formats across all municipalities.

- 4 **Include reclamer integration in municipal KPAs, KPIs, and budgets:** To institutionalise reclamer integration within local government, the IDPs and IWMPs must allocate specific budgets to support integration activities. Furthermore, integration responsibilities should be formally embedded in the Key Performance Areas (KPAs) of municipalities and reflected in the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of relevant municipal officials.
- 5 **Revise landfill site licenses to permit reclaiming activities:** The RIC should oversee the review of all landfill licenses across the district to ensure that reclaiming is formally permitted. This will require collaborative development of operational plans for safe, structured and legal reclaiming on site, with appropriate infrastructure, access controls and health and safety measures.
- 6 **Standardise reclamer registration through the SAWPRS:** Municipalities should discontinue the practice of maintaining separate local reclamer registries and instead partner with ARO, SAWPA and PROs to register reclaimers through the national South African Waste Picker Registration System (SAWPRS). This ensures reclaimers are included in the national database and become eligible for the EPR service fee. Reclamer organisations should also clearly distinguish between recruiting members to their organisations and registering reclaimers on SAWPRS. Only the latter should be termed “registration”.
- 7 **Ensure PROs align with local integration priorities:** All MOUs between PROs and municipalities should include ARO and SAWPA as signatories and be explicitly aligned with the principles of waste picker integration. PRO-funded projects must be coordinated with the RIC to ensure alignment with district-wide priorities, coherence across initiatives and the strategic use of PRO resources. As a matter of urgency, PROs should prioritise funding and co-implementing projects that pay the EPR service fee to SAWPRS-registered reclaimers in GSDM.
- 8 **Launch joint SAWPRS registration and payment campaigns:** PROs, in partnership with ARO, SAWPA and the GSDM RIC, should design and implement coordinated registration campaigns to identify and verify unregistered reclaimers, sign them onto tracking and payment systems and ensure that the buyers they sell to are also integrated into these systems. This is necessary to ensure that all eligible reclaimers receive the service fee they are legally entitled to under the EPR Regulations.
- 9 **Establish municipal support and capacity-building programmes (DFFE and SALGA):** The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) and the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) should jointly establish a national programme to support municipal reclamer integration. This should include training, technical assistance and implementation guidance to help municipalities develop and revise reclamer integration strategies in alignment with the Waste Picker Integration Guideline.
- 10 **Mobilise and secure funding for integration efforts:** DFFE and SALGA should secure financial support from National Treasury and international donors to support reclamer

integration. Dedicated funding windows should be established that municipalities can access to implement programmes aligned with the national guideline. Additionally, corporations and producers operating in or near GSDM, as well as Just Transition finance mechanisms, should be approached to support reclaimer integration.

- 11 **Develop training and public education initiatives:** With support from DFFE and SALGA, the GSDM RIC should develop tailored training and education programmes. These should include modules for municipal officials, reclaimers, waste management workers and the broader public. Public education efforts should be led by reclaimers themselves, ensuring visibility and legitimacy of their role within waste systems.
- 12 **Implement reclaimer-led separation at source programmes:** GSDM and its municipalities should work in partnership with ARO and SAWPA to co-design and implement reclaimer-led separation at source systems. These programmes should include logistical support, infrastructure development, remuneration frameworks and educational campaigns to ensure broad community participation.
- 13 **Secure dedicated funding to support implementation in GSDM:** Given that the GSDM initiative represents South Africa's first rural pilot of comprehensive reclaimer integration, GIZ should consider supporting implementation of the framework developed through this study. In addition, DFFE, SALGA, PROs and the PRO Alliance should provide funding for RIC operations, expert facilitation, campaign implementation, system development, research and documentation. This support will be essential not only to ensure success in GSDM, but to enable replication and learning across other municipalities.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Sample Table

Local Municipality	Sample Site	Reclaimers Identified	Sample Target (30%)	Male Target (30%)	Completed Responses	Male Responses
Dipaleseng	Grootvlei Dumpsite	10	3	1	4	
	Grelingstad Dumpsite	15	5	2	6	
Govan Mbeki	Secunda Dumpsite	121	36	11	45	
	Secunda/Mbelenhle Kerbside	100	30	9	10	
	Bethal Dumpsite	68	20	6	18	
	Leandra Dumpsite	20	6	2	14	
Lekwa	Morgenzon Dumpsite	10	3	1	5	

	Morgenzon Kerbside	10	3	1	2
	Standerton Dumpsite	50	15	4	9
Msukaligwa	Ermelo Dumpsite	70	21	6	21
	Ermelo Kerbside	100	30	9	28
	Breyten Dumpsite	10	3	1	8
	Chrissiesmeer Kerbside	10	3	1	4
	Davel Kerbside	10	3	1	6
Dr. Pixley Ka Seme	Volksrust Dumpsite	74	22	6	19
	Volksrust Kerbside	30	10	3	11
Chief Albert Luthuli	Dundonald Mall	3	1	0	3
	Mpuluzi Dumpsite	40	12	3	5
	Mpuluzi Kerbside	220	66	20	73
	Emanzana Dumpsite	10	3	1	3
	Elukwatini Dumpsite	25	8	2	8
Mkhondo	Mkhondo Dumpsite	73	22	6	16
	Amsterdam Dumpsite	20	6	2	6

Totals		1099	331	98	324
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Appendix 2: Voice of Reclaimers Word Cloud

