



# Organizing on the Streets: A Study of Reclaimers in the Streets of Cape Town

By Koni Benson & Nandi Vanqa-Mgijima  
International Labour Research & Information Group (ILRIG)



Women in Informal Employment  
Globalizing and Organizing

### **WIEGO Organizing Briefs**

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

Publication date: August 2010

Published by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)  
A Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee – Company No. 6273538, Registered Charity No. 1143510

WIEGO Secretariat  
Harvard University  
79 John F. Kennedy Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

WIEGO Limited  
521 Royal Exchange  
Manchester M2 7EN  
United Kingdom

[www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org)

Copyright © WIEGO. This report can be replicated for educational and organizing purposes as long as the source is acknowledged.

Design: Julian Luckham

Cover photograph: ILRIG

---

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>2. Background</b> .....	2
<b>3. Methodology</b> .....	3
3.1 Training Fieldworkers .....	3
3.2 The Scoping Exercise .....	4
3.2.1 Implementing the Scoping Exercise .....	4
<b>4. The Scoped Areas</b> .....	5
4.1 Salt River-Woodstock .....	5
4.1.1 Buy-back Centres in the Area .....	5
4.2 Khayelitsha.....	7
4.2.1 Buy-back Centres in the Area .....	7
4.3 Philippi-Gugulethu.....	7
4.3.1 Buy-back Centres in the Area .....	8
<b>5. Who are the Reclaimers?</b> .....	9
<b>6. On Reclaiming</b> .....	12
6.1 What They Reclaim.....	12
6.2 How Reclaimers See Their Work .....	12
6.3 How Work is Organized .....	13
6.4 Reclaimers' Earnings .....	14
<b>7. The Soccer World Cup and Reclaiming</b> .....	16
<b>8. On Organizing</b> .....	17
8.1 Challenges to Organizing Reclaimers.....	17
8.2 Possibilities for Organizing .....	18
<b>9. Conclusion</b> .....	20
<b>References</b> .....	23
<b>Appendices</b> .....	24
<b>A. Synopsis of the Organizations Active Amongst Waste-Pickers</b> .....	24
<b>B. Scoping Exercise Survey Form &amp; Questionnaire</b> .....	27

---



## 1. Introduction

This is a story of people working in the streets of Cape Town, reclaiming scrap metal and old bottles from streets and pavements; people scrounging for paper and cardboard in the bins of the suburban middle classes and townships. It is a story of poverty and survival, but it is also a story of how large companies come to source paper, cardboard and other inputs via poor people collecting waste on the streets. In addition, it is a story of how a large proportion of suburban waste comes to be recycled, as neo-liberal policies see local authorities cut essential services and outsource waste collection to market forces.

The people reclaiming waste in the street call their activity by various names – recycling, collecting, mining, *minza* (a term used by reclaimers meaning “trying to survive”), *ukuzizamela* (trying for yourself), *grab-grab*, and work. The most common term used is *skarrelling*, an Afrikaans slang word meaning “always on the look-out for something”, “scrounging around” or “struggling but doing something about it”. However, seeing that this brand of Afrikaans is unique to Cape Town, this report uses the word “reclaimers”

This report is divided into nine sections. Section Two provides background on reclaiming in Cape Town. Section Three presents an overview of the research methodology. Section Four provides insight into the three areas where scoping research was conducted. Section Five presents findings related to who the reclaimers are and how they see this work. Section Six focuses on what they reclaim, how they see their work, how their work is organized and their earnings. Section Seven details how reclaimers were affected in the lead up to the FIFA World Cup held in June and July 2010. Section Eight looks at challenges and opportunities for organizing, and Section Nine presents overall conclusions of the study.

## 2. Background

In South Africa there is a long history of people collecting waste off the streets to survive. During the apartheid era, waste dump sites were often located close to townships and rural villages. This waste was largely collected from white areas and dumped in black townships where it presented a danger to the health of communities living nearby. Even so, the unemployed and the poor scrounged in these dumps for scraps of food to consume and bottles to sell.

In the middle class and white areas of Cape Town in the 1970s and 1980s, waste was collected twice weekly from household properties by the City Council workers and transported to the sorting sites at the Athlone Transfer Station – where recyclable goods were sorted – and thereafter to the city dumps.

Since the adoption of neo-liberal policies by various South African administrations, the scale of private reclaiming has increased, as has the availability of poor people to be part of the reclaiming chain, for at least three reasons:

- Local authorities have reduced the quality of waste services as part of the cut-backs in the provision of public services, the need to obey tight fiscal restrictions and the worship of private businesses.<sup>1</sup>
- Large companies have sought to cheapen input costs by recycling paper, wood and other recyclable materials. Companies have also responded to legislation requiring them to use higher percentages of recyclable materials.
- The sheer scale of job losses over the period has shifted many more people out of jobs and onto the street.

These changes have seen the “hidden”, occasional, survivalist activity pursued by the poorest, unemployed and marginalized amongst the working class become the more systemic private industry of reclaiming in which, as we discovered, a much larger, yet still poor section of the working class is an indispensable component.

The story of the increase in reclaiming in Cape Town is also a story of how people come to organize themselves and seek ways to contest their oppression through different forms of collectives, a story which may promote links with other such organizations that have emerged in other parts of South Africa and the world.

---

1 For more detailed studies of South Africa’s neo-liberal policies and waste management generally, see Qotole, Xali and Barchiesi, the study by the Municipal Services Project, ILRIG and SAMWU on ‘The Commercialization of Waste Management in South Africa and the ILRIG 2004 survey.’

### 3. Methodology

The main purpose of this project was to gain insight into the informal and formal ways in which reclaimers working in the streets of Cape Town are currently organized. This was done through a three-part research process:

- Desk-top research on reclaiming and the waste management and recycling industry in Cape Town. Included here was the identification of organizations working with reclaimers in Cape Town, and gathering basic information on their activities.
- A scoping exercise in three areas of Cape Town – Salt River-Woodstock, Site B Khayelitsha, and Philippi-Gugulethu, in order to develop a sense of the broad trends amongst the lives of reclaimers in Cape Town.
- In-depth fieldwork, including interviews, in one targeted area of Cape Town. The area selected was Philippi-Gugulethu.

#### 3.1 Training Fieldworkers

Before carrying out the scoping exercise, a group of four activists was trained as research assistants who, along with two ILRIG researchers, carried out interviews for the scoping and in-depth interviews. Two human rights interns also spent a week working with the project.<sup>2</sup>

In the training sessions, reclaiming and where it fits into the City's waste management and recycling functions was discussed, as well as the value chain, and the economy as a whole. We outlined why WEIGO was interested in reclaimers and we discussed the importance, for organizing purposes, of establishing how reclaimers refer to themselves.

We then moved on to the field work and the role of the research assistants. We went over the questionnaires for the buy-back centres and for the reclaimers, and our chosen method of carrying out the scope. The ethics of research were discussed, as well as the letter of introduction, the use of photography, the distinctions between observations and facts, and the importance to the project of everyone involved. The survey and researcher reflection forms both had sections that explicitly asked for researchers' observations, which needed to be completed at the end of each day.

Personal research experiences were shared, and included doing interviews on sanitation for a project on women and public health, to working with reclaimers on the streets in Cape Town. We discussed how the survey was designed in four parts so that there was flow as well as the option of generalizing or skipping sections if reclaimers did not have a lot of time. Working in pairs for safety as well as practical support was recommended, as this would also facilitate the flow of conversation and help to maintain eye contact.

We spoke about challenges in interviews: What if someone doesn't want to talk to you? Or someone is in a rush? What about the different languages spoken in Cape Town? Because of the range of experience with interviews, the research assistants were able to share their previous challenges and suggest creative solutions to fieldwork practicalities.

We divided into teams that could cover the anticipated different languages spoken in Cape Town. As the research evolved, the combinations of researchers shifted according to need, based sometimes on language, sometimes on how well someone knew a specific area, or who needed time to flesh out the survey forms after interviews.

---

2 Research assistants: Letty Madosi, Anele Mbi, Jean Beukes and Elize Petoors. Interns: Dogu Büyükyavaşcıoğlu and Matthew Evans. ILRIG researchers: Nandi Vanqa-Mgijima and Koni Benson.

## 3.2 The Scoping Exercise

A general survey approach was used for the scoping exercise, but was by no means exhaustive or even systematic. We told field workers that the more reclaimers they spoke to the better, and that there was no set number. While it would be good to ask each person every question, even an informal conversation was worth recording. The survey forms were designed to demarcate researchers' views, observations and reflections, from reclaimers' words, views, and information offered.

In approaching reclaimers, the research project was described as an initiative of an organization interested in workers organizing for a better life. We asked if we could take photographs and we left them with an information sheet so that they could know more about the project, and possibly contact us, or become involved in activist forums.

We attempted to integrate the research into organization-building. By enlisting the aid of activists as field workers the experience of conducting the research could contribute to building their own networks, and organizations, and the project itself was enriched by the perspectives and energy of the research assistants, whose conversations about justice and oppression and organizing with reclaimers shaped the interview experience.

We had initially planned a daily reflection form about the interview process and what we had heard from reclaimers; a further component was later added to the survey where the research assistants were interviewed on their perspectives of the challenges of organizing in each area.

### 3.2.1 Implementing the Scoping Exercise

The project included a preliminary examination of three areas:

- Salt River-Woodstock
- Khayelitsha
- Philippi-Gugulethu.

before deciding to focus in a more in-depth way on the Philippi-Gugulethu area.

Between 24 November and 16 December 2009, the researchers and field workers carried out approximately 75 interviews over seven research days in three areas of the city. Interviews lasted between 10 and 45 minutes.

In each case plans were made to return to continue conversations or to meet with other reclaimers. In each area, we introduced ourselves to reclaimers coming to sell at local buy-back centres. Often we needed to wait some distance away as owners of buy-back centres were hostile to our presence. Groups would form out of curiosity around the interviewer and some people would wait for a turn to be interviewed. Others were in a rush, but while walking alongside them we could ask our questions. Interviews were primarily done with individuals, or couples who collected together, except for Philippi where groups of women and organized associations were interviewed.

In Philippi we also met a group of reclaimers who were attending a workshop run by the Community Organization Resource Centre (CORC).<sup>3</sup> The CORC staff took two of the researchers to Khayelitsha on two occasions. However, it was felt that it was important for researchers to go back and interview reclaimers independently, rather than being rushed and associated too narrowly with the collection activities of CORC.

---

3 CORC is an NGO that provides support to community networks: networks of informal settlements that are mobilized around evictions and basic services and women's collectives that are mobilized through savings (source [www.corc.co.za/snailproject.html](http://www.corc.co.za/snailproject.html))



## 4. The Scoped Areas

### 4.1 Salt River-Woodstock

Salt River-Woodstock is an old industrial area in the first ring of neighbourhoods that surround the city centre (about 1 kilometre east of Cape Town). Salt River is a railway junction which makes it a central meeting point in Cape Town. It is a working class, historically 'coloured', largely Muslim, area. The area was originally made up of ex-slaves who were given land on the edges of city-centre farms when freed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many dock workers, and later Jewish immigrants, took up residence in the small cottage row houses that intersperse the industrial sites in the area. Despite attempts during the apartheid era to declare Woodstock and Observatory exclusively white areas under the Group Areas Act, Salt River continues to reflect its historical demographic roots. Woodstock and Observatory, which are both adjacent to Salt River, are, however, both gentrifying. They have each recently been deemed 'improvement districts'.<sup>4</sup> Alfred, a reclaimer in the area, observed: "I don't have a place to stay... I used to work in the construction industry and we have built most of these buildings you see in Albert Road but now I do not have a place to stay. I cry when I see these buildings."

Observatory hosts many University of Cape Town students. In Woodstock there has been a wave of removals of people in informal shelters or who have occupied buildings and are unable to pay the increasing rents, to Delft. Light industry is still found in the area, and the sub-standard living conditions of overcrowding in crumbling buildings continues in the area as well. There is also a new wave of immigrants from other parts of Africa, who have settled in sub-divided single-residency occupation in buildings along the lower main road. There are men's shelters that are home to African migrants on nights they can raise enough money for the shelter (R25 a night). Unlike many areas of the city during the xenophobic attacks of 2008, there has been no collective violence against migrants from other African countries in the area, and many choose to reside in Salt River-Woodstock for its central location and affordable housing options.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.1.1 Buy-back Centres in the Area

The main buy-back centres are L&B Scrap; Uni-Scrap in Salt River; and Naledi, Sunshine and Metal Mania in Woodstock. These centres claim that they buy only a small proportion of their scrap from street reclaimers. Mostly, they buy from 'bakkies' [small pick up trucks] delivering from steel and paper companies, and do their own on-call collection. There are sign boards up with set prices.<sup>6</sup> At Sunshine they told us that there are standard prices set by the end-users – who are big businesses in the scrap industry. However, each buy-back centre determines what it will pay reclaimers, and there is little room for negotiation. One owner of three centres in the area told us that there is no room to negotiate prices, and "If you want to negotiate you must look for different places" to sell to. At Naledi a worker told us that "individuals just accept what we offer or the prices that are set". He asserted that big business dealers do bargain. Reclaimers from outside the area said they came to Salt River-Woodstock to sell because of the prices offered. One buy-back centre person said that despite Mondays and Wednesdays being the days that municipal waste was collected in the area, Tuesdays and Thursdays were their busiest days because "[t] here is less waste from companies" delivered early and later in the week. Likewise at Sunshine Metal on Albert Road the owner excluded street reclaimers from his description of the value chain, saying that he buys from "all people – plumbers, people from firms... people struggle on

4 For more, see Jayne Garside, "Inner city gentrification in South Africa: The case of Woodstock, Cape Town," *GeoJournal*. 30.1 (1993), pp. 29-35.

5 General photographs which we took of the area are included in our research materials/files. Also see [www.michaelvr.co.za/render.php?pg=detailed.html&detailed:acode=4#](http://www.michaelvr.co.za/render.php?pg=detailed.html&detailed:acode=4#)

6 For example, the sign at L&B reads: S/B R35.00; Copper R30.00; Brass R20.00; S/Steel R7.50; Alloy R4.50; Battery R0.60; Lead R2.50.

their own but we do provide transport for big loads of scrap metal.... we offset the transport costs from their proceeds” and sell on to SA Metal. Naledi does not provide trolleys but does provide transport at a cost when there is a request for heavy loads. The buy-back centres in Woodstock sell scrap metal to SA Metal,<sup>7</sup> Cisco,<sup>8</sup> and Fine Trading.<sup>9</sup>

The owner of Uni-Scrap, however, said that business has become worse with a drop in prices and noted that “it is quiet these days.” The owner of Sunshine Metal said that “the economic crisis affected our industry, people lost jobs in our industry... the business is downsizing. We used to make R40,000 per day and now we only make about R3,000.” His co-worker there said that there is a general downsizing of the business and a decrease in volume, despite there being a growth in collection by individuals. He estimated that there were approximately 2,000 regular reclaimers in the area (which appears to be high compared to what was observed when living and working in the area on a daily basis). Similarly, in a telephone interview with Nampak<sup>10</sup> there seems to be a strict division between the ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ sections of the reclaiming industry. Although it is problematic to divide ‘informal’ and ‘formal’, it appears that they have experienced the impact of the economic crisis differently based on evidence from the scope. For example, a worker at Uni-Scrap explained that although prices have fluctuated and sometimes dropped since August 2008, the volume of scrap they receive has increased. A worker at Naledi said that the industry in Salt River Woodstock area is “growing at an alarming rate... the industry is growing, people are unemployed and this is the easiest way of having bread on the table.” Although none of the reclaimers said the work was “easy” these sentiments echo what reclaimers have noted about more and more people collecting as people feel squeezed by the economic downturn. For example, one reclaimer spoke about there being fewer articles of value found in bins in the townships as people are separating and selling a lot of what would have been considered garbage in the past.

There are seven buy-back centres in the area. At least three are owned by the same person. This person was suspicious and uncooperative towards researchers and extremely disrespectful to reclaimers. Interviews with six buy-back centre owners and workers were conducted, and with 26 reclaimers, of whom 21 were men and five women. A large number of the reclaimers do not live in the area, but come far distances from all over the city to sell to these small store-front centres. Local reclaimers who live, collect, and sell in the area have three different municipal collection days to strategize around (Monday in Woodstock, Tuesday in Observatory, Wednesday in Salt River). From the street, these centres either take ‘everything’ (paper, plastic, metal, copper, aluminium, brass, iron) or just metal. We did not see any glass being bought or sold although some were collecting it to sell in other areas later in the day. The scrap yards (as reclaimers refer to the metal buy-back centres) have a very different atmosphere to the others. In general, competition is very high with extremely insecure working and living conditions. Theft and bodily assault from other reclaimers are common experiences.

---

7 The SA Metal Group is the largest metal recycler in South Africa; they collect and process all forms of ferrous and non-ferrous scrap metals. Some of the cleaned prepared scrap is sold to local smelters for further processing, some is consumed in the company’s smelting, alloying and casting operations and the balance is exported all over the world (source: <http://www.sametal.co.za/>)

8 Cape Town Iron & Steel Works (Pty) Ltd (Cisco) is a scrap based mini mill producing reinforcing steel in billet and bar form. The company has been in operation for some 40 years from its original site in Cape Town, South Africa. It is wholly owned subsidiary of Murray & Roberts, a leading South African Engineering Group (source: <http://www.cisco.co.za/index.html>)

9 Fine Trading trades in scrap metal for exporting (source: telephonic enquiry with the company).

10 Nampak Limited is a South African TNC producing packaging products and tissue products primarily in Africa and Europe. Its Metals and Glass segment offers tinplate and aluminum cans, bottles, foil conversions, beverage cans, and closures; coated or lacquered tinplate; steel crowns; metal drums; tinplate food cans; built up and drawn cans; plain and lacquered food can ends; decorative tin ware; and clear and coloured glass bottles. Nampak Limited was founded in 1968 and has its headquarters in Johannesburg.

## 4.2 Khayelitsha

The township of Khayelitsha (“new home”, in *isiXhosa*) was established in 1983. Khayelitsha is Cape Town’s biggest township and the second largest in South Africa, located approximately 35 kilometres from Cape Town’s central business district (CBD). It is part of the City of Cape Town’s Metro South East Region, commonly known as Cape Town’s poverty trap. Over 71% of the population of approximately 406 779 lives below the poverty line, in an area that covers 52,5 km<sup>2</sup>. The population is 100% urban, with a population density of 6,2 persons/km<sup>2</sup>. Approximately 76% of the population is younger than 25.<sup>11</sup> Major tracts of land form buffer areas between Khayelitsha and Mitchell’s Plain. This pattern of land utilization isolates the areas from each other.

Khayelitsha was established as a dormitory town and its residents are essentially commuters. As a result, it lacks a significant economic base apart from the retail and service sectors. Commuters make use of public transport to travel into the city. The township is typical, with its informal dwellings, apartheid-style matchbox houses and the recent low-cost RDP houses. Many of the people who live in informal dwellings reside in shacks which are usually constructed out of timber and recycled materials such as plastic, cardboard, old newspapers, planks and corrugated iron collected from rubbish dumps or bought from informal traders.<sup>12</sup>

The area is affected by high levels of poverty and unemployment. As such, and similar to many working class townships, people have developed survival strategies in a bid to sustain livelihoods. These strategies take various forms including waste collection for either personal use or in exchange for goods or money, garden projects and other survivalist strategies.

The scoping exercise in Khayelitsha was conducted on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of December – a period in which people had already taken time off for holidays. The first day we went to Site B informal settlement and the second day we conducted interviews in A & B Sections of Khayelitsha. There was hardly any presence of reclaimers or buy-back centres. We only found one buy-back centre and one male and a group of women reclaimers.

### 4.2.1 Buy-back Centres in the Area

The Eyethu Scrap Centre is the relatively new buy-back centre owned by a Chinese national, which has been in operation since October 2009. It buys steel and glass and sells these to Waste Control in Epping Industria. Waste Control sets the prices. The Eyethu Scrap Centre does create a space for reclaimers to bargain for better prices if they sell in bulk. Not much is known about the industry by this buy-back centre as it is only been operating in the area for a few months.

## 4.3 Philippi-Gugulethu

Philippi was originally a farming area that was rezoned in the 1970s, and since then has been an industrial zone of Cape Town. It lies parallel to the townships of Gugulethu (“our pride”, in *isiXhosa*), Nyanga East (nyanga is a Xhosa word for “moon”), Old Crossroads and the informal settlements covering the area formerly known as Brown’s Farm. Gugulethu lies very close to Cape Town’s international airport, about 20 kilometres outside of Cape Town and was originally called Nyanga West in 1958. People were allocated rooms in hostels designed in zones, where up to three men had to share a tiny room. Poverty and overcrowding were characteristic of the area at that time, and this has changed very little since the end of apartheid.<sup>13</sup> It is one of the oldest black townships in South Africa.

11 Khayelitsha Nodal Economic Development Profile, by the Department of Provincial and Local Government with Business Trust (source: [www.btrust.org.za/index.php](http://www.btrust.org.za/index.php))

12 Ibid, page 13,

13 <http://www.sa-venues.com/attractionswc/gugulethu.php>

In the first round of interviews conducted, it was established that there are organizations formed around reclaiming in the Khayelitsha and Philippi-Gugulethu areas, including community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations; church-based organizations and individuals working as collectives.

### 4.3.1 Buy-back Centres in the Area

There are seven buy-back centres that line Lansdowne Road and adjacent roads in the industrial hub of Philippi, trading in scrap metal, steel, aluminium, copper and plastic. They buy the bulk of their scrap from reclaimers from the surrounding areas along the Lansdowne Road corridor, including Gugulethu, the Philippi informal settlement, New Crossroads, Manenberg, Nyanga East and Old Crossroads. They then sell their recyclables to SA Metal and Faivolwits.

We managed to speak to three buy-back centre managers and two drivers from a company that transports the recyclables to Cape Town harbour for export. Two of these buy-back centres are owned by white men and one by a black male, who observed that they have seen a boom in this industry.

The two biggest, and busiest, scrap metal buy-back centres in the area are Boland and Scrap for Africa. Scrap for Africa is the oldest buy-back centre in the area, having been in operation since the 1980s. It mainly buys from local reclaimers, who come to the buy-back centres using different modes of portage, including horse carts, municipal refuse bins, supermarket trolleys, self-made carts and “bakkies”. The woman we spoke to from Scrap for Africa claimed that in poorer communities the scrap yard has a larger customer base than in the middle or upper class areas: “Reclaimers from poorer areas work harder due to the economic downturn that tends to affect the poor communities severely”. The manager of the buy-back centre claimed that since 2008-2009 the business has scaled down due to the economic crisis. His view was that there was now not much export of processed material, whereas before they used to have more than 10 containers shipped to overseas buyers. Although they could not tell how often they used to export, both buy-back centres claim that in 2010 there has been an improvement in business thus far.<sup>14</sup>

The buy-back centres that trade in metal and copper have a continual presence of groups or individual men outside the centres burning tyres and heating steel material to get copper. They prefer to do this hard work because it pays more than other materials, and this provided the opportunity to engage them at length.

The cashier at Philippi Plastic Recycle was initially not helpful, appearing rude and frustrated. He referred to the research team as “Government agencies that just come to play with our feelings” and we were dismissed. However, we managed to insist that we want to engage him on the issues that he was raising about the government’s failure to feed and create decent work. He later calmed down and constructively engaged. It became clear that he was also confronted with his own challenges of poverty and unemployment. The man turned out to be a former Umkhonto weSizwe<sup>15</sup> (MK) cadre who became disappointed by the government of his own party. He has been unemployed since returning from exile, and was only employed in 2009 starting with a salary as little as R800.

The reclaimers informed us that the cashier was very lenient towards women reclaimers. If they bring material at a value less than R10.00 the cashier will increase the kilograms so that they can get at least R10.00. The buy-back centre cashier also feels that the money paid to people was too little. “At times they cannot even afford a loaf of bread,” and hence he has to come to their rescue at times. The cashier told us that he only sees the owner – an Indian man – in the morning when they open and again before they close for the day.

---

14 Telephone interviews were conducted with the personnel from both Scrap for Africa and Boland Scrap Metal (07 April 2010).

15 Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) the then military wing of the African National Congress (ANC).

## 5. Who are the Reclaimers?

In the Salt River-Woodstock area, the majority of reclaimers were between the ages of 30 and 60. All were black South Africans. Most spoke Afrikaans as a first language, were fluent in English, and could be identified as 'coloured'. Five people identified themselves as Xhosa and two as Tswana. They told us that while there are immigrants and a few white reclaimers, the majority of people reclaiming in the area were Xhosa- or Afrikaans-speaking black men.

Reclaimers from outside the area said they came to Salt River-Woodstock to sell because of the better prices being offered. Some of the reclaimers actually live on the streets in the area but many more people come from "all over Cape Town, as far as Khayelitsha," Manenberg, Delft as well as surrounding areas. Those reclaimers we interviewed lived in the Salt River-Woodstock, Observatory, Walmer Estate and Mowbray areas and collected and sold in the area. There were also people from Khayelitsha, Elsie's River, Valhalla Park, Bonteheuwel, Ysterplaat and Delft. They come by foot, by train, dragging trolleys, and by horse and cart. While they mostly sell in the Salt River-Woodstock area on a daily basis to the buy-back centres mentioned, they also sell in the city centre (at the Good Hope buy-back centre, and the Cape Town City Depot). They also sell empty ink cartridges (for R20 in Maitland), steel in Koeberg, and clothes in the townships.

Many people in the Salt River-Woodstock area who collect on the street also sleep on the street, and there is a common thread of having lost previous jobs and found that despite harassment it is possible to survive through recycling: "I have been more than 20 years on the street. When I was first dumped I discovered that one can recycle and make money to live from," said Freddie.

According to a manager from CORC, there is great potential in this area for organizing people who not only work but sleep on the street because they have few other options and are thus extremely motivated and productive in their collection activities. In their experience, many of the reclaimers they used to know in the area were migrants from other African countries who have been moved to Delft. One collector we spoke to said that "there are a lot of people starving, like Nigerians and people from Kenya," and the shelters in Woodstock and the boarding houses in Salt River are home to many immigrants. However, all the reclaimers we met in the area were South African, as were those activists from the Gympie Street Residents' Association.

In Khayelitsha the reclaimers were unemployed and between the ages of 50 and 80. The majority of reclaimers interviewed were dependent on social security schemes. Reclaiming was seen as a supplementary income. A 50-year old reclaimer lost his employment as a result of retrenchment, while the others were elderly reclaimers entitled to receive the old-age social security pension.

In Philippi-Gugulethu the majority of reclaimers were African with just a handful of "coloureds". They were unemployed youth, and elderly, middle-aged men and women. The youngest reclaimer was 23 years old with the oldest being a 76-year old man. We observed a large number of young boys who concentrated on scrap metal, iron and copper rather than light and less lucrative types of waste. These young boys were between the ages of 9 and 17, but it proved impossible to speak to speak to them, as they ran away when approached by the researchers. There were a few individuals who continued to work in the "formal" economy as security guards, and some even claimed that they had their own businesses.

The majority of reclaimers encountered in township streets are men pushing supermarket trolleys, self-made carts, horse carts or black wheeled bins intended for rubbish. In most cases women often carry their collection by hand or on their heads and may have babies on their backs. Most importantly we found out that reclaimers were disillusioned work seekers, who perform reclaiming as an alternative means of survival.

The reclaimers had lost employment as a result of retrenchment, with some now employed on a temporary basis, and some having never experienced the world of formal work. The majority of women interviewed are heads of households from the surrounding townships and the

informal settlement. About 70% of these women are from the rural areas in the former Transkei and Ciskei,<sup>16</sup> and largely had left their homes with the hope of a decent life in the urban areas through employment, access to health care and education for their children, and possibly even a decent home. In essence, they could no longer deal with the worst forms of poverty and unemployment they had endured, which resulted in high stress levels for the women in particular, and in malnourished children. Even in the cities there is not much potential for the vulnerable to sustain their livelihoods, since poverty and unemployment levels remain high. They are thus also involved in reclaiming after arriving in the city.

In all three areas where the study was conducted, street reclaiming is highly gendered. Only a small percentage of the reclaimers were women, which seems representative of the gendered demographics of the industry in this area. Women mainly focus on reclaiming plastic, paper, cardboard and glass bottles. One reclaimer claimed that this is because “it is soft work for women”. Men tend to focus on collecting solid waste like iron ore, steel, copper, metal, with a few collecting light waste such as paper, plastic and glass bottles.

Men earn higher incomes than women as they collect technical and heavy material, when compared with women who tend to collect light waste which pays very small amounts. Everyone we asked in these areas said there were more men than women collecting, which concurs with our own observations. Few gave reasons. Lindy\*<sup>17</sup> said she “helps” her boyfriend, and that some people work as couples: “I work together with my fiancé as you can see,” said Malcolm\*. One group of reclaimers sleeps and works as a foursome: “We... work together. We have one trolley. We all come to sell together. We are two women and two men. The men work at Elite taxi rank. If they are working then their women will come on their own. Sometimes the women do house work but not every day.”

The two men were of the view that men in their situation have more insecure work prospects. Kennedy\* explained that it was because “jobs were scarce for men but women can prostitute. If they don’t work they earn about R400 a day in prostitution.” On the other hand, said Farouk\*, “Women and men more or less do the same thing but women are more advanced because owners of houses like and trust them more than us men.”

In general, competition is very high with extremely insecure working and living conditions. Theft and bodily assault from other reclaimers were common experiences. Women and men both spoke of reclaiming being physically difficult for women, although we observed women with extremely heavy loads, mostly of less lucrative wares such as cardboard and plastic. Major’s\* comments were common: “Anybody with an ID book can do selling. But mostly men collect wire, steel and metal. Women collect books, paper and clothes.” This observation was echoed by all reclaimers.

The owner of Sunshine Metals observed that although both women and men come to sell, it is mostly men. In one case, Laura\*, a woman in Woodstock, was waiting across the street for a man she knew to go and sell to Metal Mania where only men went inside. We could not get an explanation for this from either the reclaimers or the women workers at Metal Mania.

The only women on the premises were two workers sitting in the heat of the day in a metal container in front of the storefront ripping pages from books, and bagging what was worth more as scrap paper than as second hand texts. We had a brief conversation with them during their smoke break where they said they were the wives of workers there and were paid R300 a week to rip up and bag paper all day.

Where couples have access to some form of semi-permanent dwelling, gender dynamics play out in the same way amongst reclaimers as in more formal households. Women often work fewer hours when compared with their male counterparts. The reason given for this was that they were

---

<sup>16</sup> Transkei and Ciskei were areas referred to as Bantustans, created by the apartheid-era government. They were quasi-independent tribal reserves designed to concentrate blacks in economically undesirable territories. They were reincorporated into South Africa at the time of the first democratic election in 1994.

<sup>17</sup> All \* indicate that these are not their real names.

still required to carry out household chores. Some women collect with babies on their backs; they are also expected to perform other chores like preparing meals, cleaning the house and attending to children. One of the woman interviewed said that she wakes up as early as 5 am to prepare her children for school, after which she leaves the house to do reclaiming until 13h00 and then goes back home to clean and prepare a meal. The cooking, of course, would depend on whether she had managed to get something from reclaiming that day.

In other areas such as Philippi, women are involved in associations or communal projects like food gardening projects, sewing, crafts, bead work and recycling. The elderly people are engaged in this activity to supplement their pensions so as to feed their families and grandchildren.

## 6. On Reclaiming

### 6.1 What They Reclaim

Of the 26 people interviewed in Salt River-Woodstock, fifteen said that they collected a combination of paper, plastic, and metals. Five said they collect only scrap metal (which includes copper, brass, iron and steel), two collected clothes only, one collected only plastic, saying it was worth more than paper, and one person said they (with two friends) collect only empty bottles because they were “too old to push a trolley.” Of the five women, only one, who works with her husband, collected everything, including metal, and another included copper in her list of what she collects. No other women collected metals; instead they collected paper, plastics, or clothes because they are easily accessible and portable to carry to the buy-back centres.

While most of what was reclaimed is sold to buy-back centres there are also cases of selling, in the case of Salt River, to antique shops. Some items like food, clothes, some furniture, and electrical appliances were collected for keeping, as well as in one case “cardboards, fencing, and a lamp post,” which one collector explained he was collecting because he was trying to upgrade his house in Blikkiesdorp, a Temporary Resettlement Area (TRA) in Delft.

All the reclaimers we spoke to in Khayelitsha reclaimed glass bottles to sell to CORC. The person running the waste truck for CORC picks up the waste from reclaimers’ houses every third or fourth week of the month. Both the old man and the group of elderly reclaimers collect these glass bottles around Khayelitsha, either using supermarket grocery trolleys or carrier bags. The old man claims that the collection of bottles is easy work for a man. He collects, breaks the bottles and puts them in bags. This work is performed without any protective clothing.

In Philippi-Gugulethu, groups mainly focus on reclaiming glass bottles, with the exception of a group that reclaimed waste cloth from the nearby textile and clothing factories. Of the forty-seven people interviewed, ten reclaimed plastic waste, three groups and five to six individuals reclaimed glass bottles, and the rest reclaimed metal, copper, iron, steel, zinc, old kettles, television sets, refrigerators, and other valuables for household use. There were only two male reclaimers who said that they collected plastic waste, while the majority of female reclaimers collected cold drink cans and plastic materials.

### 6.2 How Reclaimers See Their Work

As noted above, reclaimers used the following terms to describe their activities: recycling, collecting, *skarrelling*, mining, *minza* (trying to survive), *ukuzizamela* (trying for yourself), grab-grab, and work. The most common term was *skarrelling*. Others use terms like “waste pickers,” or “strollers” which referred both to the trolleys, as well as to strolling the streets. A worker at Uni-Scrap said they were called “customers.” One buy-back owner we spoke to on the phone said, “I know them all so well, they sleep near here and drink. I have all sorts of names I call them. You’d call them *bergies*<sup>18</sup> or vagrants but I won’t offend your pretty little ears by telling you what I call them when I’m cross.”

Amongst the reasons for reclaimers putting up with the offensive terms used to describe them by the buy-back centre owners is the requirement that reclaimers need ID documents<sup>19</sup> to sell. By

<sup>18</sup> Bergies is a term referring, loosely, to people who, it is claimed, lived in caves along Cape Town’s mountains (“berg” is Afrikaans for mountain). Today it is a derogatory term for a homeless person, a beggar and/or any vagrant.

<sup>19</sup> All South African citizens are eligible to have identity books which are required in order to vote and access government grants, amongst numerous other activities. However, many South Africans do not have identity books due to difficulties in negotiating their way through the bureaucratic requirements. Although foreign migrants may have asylum papers, visas or other forms of legal status in the country these are often not recognized. Migrants without legal status also do not have identity documents that would be acceptable to buyers in these circumstances



being “nice to them”, as one reclaimer put it, “regulars”, especially selling paper and plastics, are often exempted by buy-back centres from the rule that identity documentation must be shown at each interaction to be able to sell to the centres. This is a huge impediment on reclaimers’ selling days and we met people waiting outside for friends to arrive whom they could trust to do their selling for them as they were without identity documents.

As regards the question of whether reclaimers saw themselves as workers there were interesting responses. In many cases people continually referred to a time when they were formally employed when answering questions about their work:

“I was a worker before, worked in Athlone at Sunnyside as a labourer. I lost my job 3 or 4 years ago and so I do this. I have been living outside on the street in Observatory for 6 or 7 years, said David\*. Major\* from Mowbray told us that he sees what he does as wasting time “because I do not call it a job, but just collecting for a living.” James\* said “I have been doing this since 2004 when there was no work, and then I do it (*skarrel*). If I have work, then I go and work (and wash cars).”

A few reclaimers however repudiated Major’s answer: “I am a worker because I go out every morning like any ordinary worker. I don’t say I go to *skarrel* but I go to work. It is honest living, therefore it is work.” Many stressed how they worked hard, were self-starters, and were doing honest work. Marcus\* said “It’s an honest living; a hard day’s work.” Similarly Benson\* said “I do not steal or break houses. It is an honest living.”

Many regarded reclaiming as work while very few saw it as a business. Most importantly, they regard reclaiming as something that feeds their families. They also shared with us how a handful of people disregard them because they reclaim waste. They claimed that they are called derogatory names such as “*bergies*”. A woman from Langa said that the people in the area call them “*Mabuyaze*” (i.e. “come back with nothing”). She said this is how people refer to them but they could not give up on the project because it is their only source of income.

Interestingly enough some said that they feel a sense of respect and acknowledgement from communities in which they reclaim. They have found communities to be very sympathetic and helpful by offering them valuable goods for recycling. One of the elders noted, “These people are indirectly workers of these buy-back centres, working under harsh conditions and without any acknowledgement and benefits afforded to them”. He views the conduct of buy-back centres as inhumane and exploitative even to their own workers. “These Boers are just concerned about their own families while reclaimers are working under harsh conditions to enrich an individual instead of the poor communities they come from.”

### 6.3 How Work is Organized

Of those people interviewed, there was almost a 50/50 split as regards whether reclaimers worked individually or in some form of collaboration. A Uni-Scrap worker said that most reclaimers come as groups of friends or couples. The Uni-Scrap workers claimed that reclaimers share the proceeds. Although the money is sometimes shared unequally it is very rare to see them fighting over the proceeds. This echoed what reclaimers themselves had explained, that profits are shared equally.

Reclaimers also organize their work according to strategic days, times, places, and prices. Six people spoke about municipal collection days. Two spoke of key times and relationships with residents, where those residents trust them, and they are invited by residents to take from their refuse bins, also sometimes being given food.

One reclaimer starts working from six o’clock in the morning and relaxes for a few hours in the afternoon. He then starts working again from five o’clock in the evening when the home-owners have returned from work, and takes the reclaimed items to the scrap yard the following day. Shaik\* said that he planned his work in advance, and Stanley\* claimed that there are known early-birds.

Mandla\* told us that selling waste is on a first-come-first-served basis and on Mondays they wake up early for waste reclaiming hoping to collect more from the waste accumulated over the week-end.

It is interesting that many spoke of working "9 to 5" when asked about their working hours, but when speaking about how they organize their work in terms of days and times and streets, the specifics emerged of where people have learned to go and when.

Those who worked individually said there were no negotiations with others as to where or when to collect: "I take what I see, no territories or gangs. If it is rubbish day in Mowbray I go there, or Vredehoek (town)," said Mathius Jansen\*. But others mentioned ethnicity, and fighting over food as sources of conflict. Bethuel\* explained that he works alone and because he is a Tswana he does not mix extensively with other people. He further claimed that they sometimes fight one another due to ethnic/language differences. Bethuel asserts that he is from Soweto and likes to stay alone. One reclaimer, David\*, said: "some people say that this is their street, you go away! I collect here! I don't have a specific street. If you put strollers together, you'll get murdered. I don't know you, you stab me. It's about finding people you can trust to work with." He continued that "sometimes I work with my friend who is a man. I don't have a girlfriend so I don't have her to collect with."

A reclaimer from Khayelitsha said that he does reclaiming alone on a daily basis and regards this as work. His day starts at 6 in the morning and ends at 4 in the afternoon, but on some days he takes time to buy stock for the shop. The elderly women reclaimers take turns or do reclaiming when they are free or do not have materials for their projects. "We collect individually for our own needs – but we do also share the collection if one of us is not able to reach a mark up or has been ill," said one reclaimer. They collect empty bottles everyday around Khayelitsha, mostly targeting places where there have been social functions like weddings and *imigidi* (initiation ceremonies).

This was also the case in Philippi-Gugulethu where we found a similar split between people working as individuals and those that work in pairs or in groups of 4 to 10 or more. They work as friends or at times as family members; spouses and children. Some club together to make up the kilograms and share the money. One man used to work with a friend that introduced him to this work, who later died due to a stabbing in a shebeen.<sup>20</sup>

Those who are in groups share the proceeds equally. Initially they used to divide the proceeds according to each one's contribution but they experienced conflicts, so now they share it equally and it does not matter even if some people arrived late. An elderly man of 76 works with a friend. Most of them do their daily collections in the neighbourhood, the airport industrial area and in sites where there are demolitions. They go to residential areas when there are local municipal garbage collection days.

## 6.4 Reclaimers' Earnings

There was a wide range of estimates as to how much money reclaimers make in a day's work. All the reclaimers interviewed complained about the poor prices the buy-back centres offer. They feel that the buy-back centres are earning huge profits at their expense.

Reclaimers from the Philippi-Gugulethu area claimed that prices had gone down sharply since 2008. A kilogram of light steel used to be R1.00 but now it is worth 70c. The amounts earned by reclaimers per day for plastic varies from as little as R1,60 to R68 at 80c per kilogram. Buy-back centres in the Salt River-Woodstock area were viewed as offering good prices.

Some of the reclaimers in Salt River-Woodstock said that they could earn as much as R60 to R70 per day while others spoke more of R10 to R50 per day. To break this down more precisely, two said they made less than R10 and were collecting to buy bread or a drink. Seven said they made between R10 and R20 a day. Six said they made between R30 and R50 a day. Seven reclaimers made between R60 and R80 a day.

---

<sup>20</sup> *Shebeens* are mostly found in townships, and are either licensed or unlicensed bars.

Those in the lower and middle range of earnings seemed to be working on a hand-to-mouth basis. For example, a male reclaimer told us that between 07h00 and 10h00 he “*skarrelled*” to earn between R60 and R70 which he used to supplement his earnings from cleaning taxi cabs for R280 a week (which he did six days a week for the rest of the day). Even with this consistent job, he did not earn enough to pay rent, and slept in an empty garage with his partner, who also collected. “Maybe next year they will kick us out and then I will need a place, so when I *skarrel*, I am also looking for places to rent.” He said he spends his money “first on food, then clothes, then a dop”.<sup>21</sup> His goal was to be able to open a bank account and save by 2011.

Other very low earners also spoke of using their income for bread and alcohol. Most would agree with Justice who said that he earned R50 to R70 a day, which was “not much.” Unlike the fluctuating “range” described by many, the highest and most consistent earners were those who focused on scrap metal, all of whom were male. On average the metal reclaimers we spoke to earned more than R100 a day, with one group of three young men in their teens and late twenties claiming to earn up to R1 000 per day.

Also lucrative were the endeavours of Huston\* who collected everything, including antiques, and between him and his co-worker, who also painted and sold T-shirts, they had an intricate system of collecting and selling what others who we spoke to in the area took little notice of.

In Khayelitsha a reclaimer who was interviewed gets approximately R400 a month from CORC. These women get paid R10 for a full municipal refuse bin. They feel that the money is too little but at least it helps for the day-to-day necessities like bread. They claim that because of their age they are not able to do more. Their ages range from 70 to the 80s and ill-health prevents them from participating in waste-collection, hence they believe in the principle of sharing. The women view this as something that enables them to provide food for their families. They are not concerned about calling it a job or work or a project, as long it supplements their old-age social grants.

According to the manager of the plastic buy-back centre, the ex-MK cadre, reclaimers are not making good money, especially females who tend to collect fewer things. They may barely make R50 a day, whereas a male reclaimer with a self-made cart can collect loads of plastic weighing up to 86 kilograms.

Some claim that they get from as little as R10 from Scrap for Africa. If they collect steel up to 60 kilograms in weight, they can get up to R80. Some claimed that two big bags of steel and tin earn them R70. A reclaimer claimed that at Boland Scrap he is paid R80 for 20 kilograms of steel or copper while another reclaimer stated that he collects metal from 60 kilograms up to 100 kilograms but did not provide the amount he earns for this weight. Another claimed that the average payment in a day ranges from as little as R30 to R100.

A huge steel container filled with glass bottles pays up to a R1 000 and takes months to fill. One woman claimed that it was really difficult because it takes about two weeks to make a beam full of glass bottles and she gets about R1 000 after two months. Male reclaimers explained that they earn “good” money from collecting copper, while the lowest paying waste reclaiming activity is plastic collection.

---

<sup>21</sup> Literally means a lot of an alcoholic beverage.

## 7. The Soccer World Cup and Reclaiming

People in the Salt River-Woodstock area have been reclaiming on the streets for anything between two and twenty years. There was consensus that life is hard, collection is unpredictable, there is little job security, there are cyclical periods, and that recently things have become more difficult, partly because of the economic crisis, but also because of the World Cup. The area is being gentrified as new investment flows into Cape Town and because of World Cup preparations.

“Scrap,” said Alfred, “is scarce and people are losing jobs in big numbers.” One woman – who preferred to remain anonymous – told us that she had been collecting for 13 years and that it was generally the same. However “with the World Cup police are arresting and harassing vagrants and want people off the streets.” Melvin told us that he had been collecting for three years: “Over those three years things have gone bad to worse. Like money is going down. Nobody is safe as well, to sleep outside.” As part of the 2010 World Cup clean-up by the authorities, home owners have also harassed reclaimers. “People are looking badly at us, I mean owners of houses,” said Frank. “Likewise, City council displaced us before soccer 2010” said Michael. “We also know of recent evictions in Woodstock of shack dwellers and of people unable to pay the escalating rents.”

The Gympie Street Residents is a group that has been known to ILRIG for many years. After a prolonged struggle to stay in their residences, and sleeping on the street itself after their eviction, they were moved to Delft. CORC also mentioned that they used to have many thriving reclaimers with whom they worked in Woodstock but they have been removed to Delft. Those in Delft have no way of getting to buy-back centres in Delft and CORC was open to meeting with the ex-residents of Gympie Street.

## 8. On Organizing

### 8.1 Challenges to Organizing Reclaimers

There are many challenges to organizing in these areas. Apart from the spaces immediately outside the buy-back centres – which are on main roads and behind small storefronts – there are no common meeting places for collectors. Owners of the buy-back centres and the homeowners and shop-owners actively discourage loitering. One reclaimer reported a police car making arrests of reclaimers in the Salt River-Woodstock area.

In the case of Salt River-Woodstock, except for a few church-run soup kitchens, no-one spoke of any community-based organizing in this area. One person mentioned that some reclaimers “blew it” for the rest of them: “There was Loaves and Fishes [a church initiative] who used to help us with food. There is a lot of trouble now, it’s Christmas time – reclaimers are using drugs and sometimes they are very rude”. People do not live in the same area – Salt River – but come from all over. There is suspicion and competition between collectors. Most reclaimers do not earn much and those that hustle seem uninterested – time is money. There is also a high level of alcoholism.

In the Philippi-Gugulethu and the Khayelitsha areas, however, there appeared to be a greater scope and a longer history of forms of organizing. A number of organizations are active, from NGOs and church organizations to instances of self-organization of the reclaimers themselves.<sup>22</sup>

A woman from the Samora Machel informal settlement, involved in a community-based project, complained that the councillor in her area was making their situation more difficult. The councillor was formerly from the ANC and she is now from the COPE<sup>23</sup> to which she defected. The councillor had evicted them from the Tsoga building where they were conducting their reclaiming projects, and they are struggling to get the building back. They have contacted the Cape Town municipality, which had erected the building at their request, but no progress has been made as yet.

A woman from Langa – reclaiming in the same Philippi-Gugulethu area – said that the people in the area call them “*Mabuyaze*” i.e. “come back with nothing”. She said that this did not discourage them and they will not give up the project because it is their only source of income. She explained that it is really difficult because it takes about two weeks to make a beam full of scrap bottles and she gets about R1 000 after two months.

The co-ordinator of the Samora project is also an ANC organizer whereas many of her project’s colleagues belong to other political parties, such as the United Democratic Movement and the Pan Africanist Congress. The ANC councillor has been asking the woman to leave the project and become fully involved in the ANC. She has refused to do so because she does not want to abandon the women in her project with whom she has been working since 1998 and who live in the same area.

Reclaimers also work in fear of being harassed by the police and are often accused of stealing from their communities. They are routinely and unnecessarily questioned by the police. As a result, they were afraid of the interviewers, thinking that we were working with the police. They said things are difficult for them because the police harass them almost every day. However, they explained that they have a good working relationship with the owner of the buy-back centre.

Some people explained that their health is deteriorating as they are continually exposed to harmful substances but they have to work because they do not qualify for social grants. Some of the challenges experienced include that the bins are very dirty – there is spoilt food, sputum, sanitary pads, dead cats, rats, disposable nappies and all sorts of garbage. They claim that they

<sup>22</sup> For a list of such organizations and a brief history of each see Appendix 1.

<sup>23</sup> The Congress of the People is a political party comprising largely members who defected from the African National Congress after its 2008 National Conference at Polokwane in Limpopo Province.

are susceptible to all forms of diseases. Sometimes people throw human waste over the waste and protective clothing is a necessity. They claim that they have no protective clothing when searching through the refuse bins.

In winter it becomes extremely difficult because of Cape Town's rainy season. "We wish to get working materials like gloves because the bottles are damaging our hands". Reclaimers selling metal and other solid waste products claim that some of their colleagues have been diagnosed with tuberculosis and are either undergoing treatment or have absconded and yet continue to be exposed to the health hazards because they need to earn a living. One middle-aged woman complained about chest pains and night coughs. She is of the opinion that her condition is as a result of scratching in waste and because there is no running water and toilets where they stay in the Europe informal settlement. For elderly women and men in their 70s and 80s from the Masibambane project, working under these conditions is a huge challenge given their fragile state of health. They are not in a position to fully participate in waste-reclaiming hence they believe in the principle of sharing with those who are less fortunate to get extra cash. They are also exposed to dangerous situations, such as rape and robbery.

## **8.2 Possibilities for Organizing**

Most of the organizations interviewed are involved in setting up income-support projects aimed at helping reclaimers to bolster their earnings, such as sewing, health and nutrition projects. Reclaiming is seen as an individual effort which must be supplemented by other activities to sustain livelihoods. For example, the sewing group under Kolping primarily focuses on sewing; waste is collected for textiles; and clothing material for the sewing project.

The study found that these organizations are not organizing around reclaiming; nor are these instances of reclaimers contesting the terms of their exploitation and insertion into the recycling industry.

However, there are instances in which groups of reclaimers come together to collectively organize their work. These are self-initiatives driven by their own interests to obtain reasonable payments at the end of the day. They organize their work by sharing duties and combine all waste collected to sell this where they will share the proceeds equally.

These groups' main focus is waste-reclaiming and they are directly involved in the collection and selling of recyclables. There are no intermediaries in this chain. Self-organizing around reclaiming could be used to refer to these groups because they have themselves formed informal collectives as a result of reclaiming. However, these groups have not – at least insofar as it was possible to discern from the interviews – on this basis tried to change the power relations between themselves and buy-back centres. Their concern is merely to ensure that they collect sufficient amounts to get at the very least a decent payout. They are not, as yet, organizing around the known challenges of health risks and paltry payouts by buy-back centres. They simply have no time to deal with these challenges. These formations are like fluid structures – members come and go and they are not obligated to any rules or standards.

However, there is a third category of organized groups. This comprises organizations that have started off with a particular focus, but have then been somewhat transformed, by the reclaimers themselves, into something else. One such organization is Tsoga, in Langa, which brought local communities to work together on issues such as littering, food gardening, the greening of parks, nursery care, beading and weaving, sewing and glass recycling. Today the reclaimers in Langa see Tsoga as their own organization standing up against a local councillor who threatens to close it down.

Another example is the Cart Horse Association in Philippi, which started as an initiative of the SPCA to protect horses (which are often used by reclaimers in Cape Town for transport) from

abuse. Today, women reclaimers in particular meet regularly under its auspices and stamp their own agenda on the Association.

According to one reclaimer in Philippi-Gugulethu, buy-back centres are the worst employers in this industry. They exploit, firstly, by manipulating prices to be paid to reclaimers and, secondly, by abusing the workers formally or indirectly employed by these buy-back centres. "There is exploitation of reclaimers including workers working in these buy-back centres". This person argued that if reclaimers could form co-operatives, the buy-back centres would be something of the past, because these buy-back centres earn exorbitant profits at the expense of reclaimers.

He regards reclaimers as workers directly selling their labour power to an employer. He asserts that without these workers the owners would not be driving expensive cars, and all the profits would benefit poor families that are currently starving. "We are not informed of possible opportunities in the activity or business. For reclaimers, this is a form of employment that is not recognized. There are greater opportunities if reclaimers could be organized. There are obviously useless individuals, picking and stealing in their neighbourhood. But we need not to bother about them." At the same time, many people showed interest in hearing about how this work is organized elsewhere and were open to alternative ways of tackling the hardships they face in their lives that have resulted in their taking up reclaiming.

Lydia\* said: there was not "yet" an organization and that she "would like to be part of an organization." Likewise Michael\* said that there is "nothing. If something happens there is nowhere to report it, no union to protect our rights." Marucan\* similarly mentioned the desire for a union, saying "there are problems with cops and security. I would like there to be an association or a union." Melvin\* concluded the interview by saying: "I wish all the reclaimers can come together, start co-operation and teach each other or share skills so that they can have a better future. I do not want to die waste picking."

## 9. Conclusion

The fact that people are forced to live on the streets, and on reclaiming, is a sad testimony to our times, a testimony they shared with us: of being diagnosed with tuberculosis; coughing, dying at *shebeens* and fighting each other due to ethnicity or language differences. These are all issues arising from extreme poverty that are inextricably linked to many factors, including unemployment and the government's neo-liberal policies. As articulated by some of the waste-pickers themselves, the key to challenging these circumstances is through organization, through their own collective strength.

This leads to the important issue that organizing needs to be around something. We can, in this regard, delineate issues associated with their living conditions, issues associated with relations with the state and the police and issues which are about the power relations of their own exploitation.

In all the three areas in which we conducted interviews, reclaimers described the following in respect of their concerns about their living conditions: shelter, winter rains, theft, health concerns, harassment from the police, and negative behaviour from private security firms and residents. For example, one woman spoke about how the worst part of being a reclaimer was that there was not enough money for shelter. Three people spoke about the challenges posed by Cape Town's rainy winters which last from April to October. "Winter is the worst part of the job", said Faik\*, while "sometimes it's good luck and other day's bad luck. You don't really know about the weather – but it prevents us from working," says Fani\*. "When it is raining we can't work and nobody takes you seriously and respects you. If you don't collect anything you don't have food," said Melvin\*. "You drink," said one reclaimer in despair, "because there are no jobs and because you are cold."

These are all clear issues that affect reclaimers. But whether people would want to organize around reclaiming itself is unclear. People want job security and a better life, but as Melvin\* said, he does not want to die a reclaimer. There would need to be a sense that organizing can transform the daily grind faced by people on the street who collect waste under the current conditions, not out of a passion for recycling, or prospects for profit, but out of desperation. Given any other opportunities most collectors in the area – with the exception of those in the scrap metal industry – would prefer to do something else.

Then there are issues where reclaimers come directly up against the police as an enforcer of the power of the state. It does not help that turning the streets into homes, let alone places of work, is criminalized. Police harassment is linked to being homeless, and also to the assumption of theft of copper wires, which gives everyone a bad reputation. "Home owners", said Alfred\*, "swear at us. Some are nice and others are rude." Denver concurs: "People are embarrassing and downgrading us. Sometimes they swear at us but sometimes others help with bread." Likewise there was a mixed response to the researchers and to the reclaimers being interviewed by other people involved in the industry. One person outside of L&B Scrap was angered by our presence, shouting "do not speak to them. They do nothing for us" and pulled a knife, threatening to stab the person being interviewed. It seemed that the owner had put him up to it, and he himself was interviewed at a later stage.

In general there was an appreciation for a few minutes of respect and conversation between researchers and reclaimers. "If you are caught carrying copper, the police will chase you," said Kenneth\*. Supermarkets often confiscate trolleys. Bodily violence is common as Morgan\* explained: "Sometimes I have to stab people" to protect the scrap metal I have collected. Rosaline\* said that "people tend to be greedy and steal from one another. I don't know why, because we are all hungry." Daily bodily and state violence could be one node around which to organize as it is a concern to all street reclaimers in very similar ways to sex workers and street vendors.

Women seemed particularly interested in talking about their experiences and the little leeway they have to access a better income. Their motivation to organize comes from a sense of injustice and exploitation: "we are working so hard and the owners are just paying paltry amounts of money".



There would, however, need to be some outside intervention made to strengthen these existing structures.

The majority of women reclaimers are single mothers, at times without any financial support from their male partners. Their labour is spread between reclaiming and the chores, of caring for the children and the sick and providing a meal. Male reclaimers share the universal perception that women are the weaker sex and that therefore certain jobs should be reserved for them. So the oppression experienced by women reclaimers is something to organize reclaimers around, and it is significant that the forms of self-organization encountered in Philippi, for instance, were largely by women.

There was also a clear sense of exploitation as reclaimers. They were keenly aware of the power relations of their impoverishment at the expense of the wealth accrued by buy-back centre owners and others in the industry. There was a clear and consistent sense of the contrast between the long hours and hard work they did, the potential of high volumes of waste/goods they produced for the owners of buy-back centres, and the little money they receive. This sense of the potential and yet injustice in the division of labour and wealth could translate into further discussion of the methods and content of organizing in the industry, if the practicalities of people's living conditions and the way the industry in the area works could be overcome.

Some of the research assistants continued with interviews as they went about their daily lives, talking to collectors they met in various areas of the city. In the City centre, for example, there was a group of reclaimers sleeping in a field near the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). While the crowd discussing their work grew to about 15 people on two occasions, city police were busy tipping over bins which they had been using to collect materials and store their own belongings. What they were most upset about was the constant struggle over having their papers – especially their identity documents – taken or thrown away by the police. They were convinced that the police permitted only certain people, who were also getting kick backs from the buy-back centres, to collect freely. They claimed that their problems with the police were similar to those of street traders, with whom they had a good relationship, guarding their space in the city and receiving bits of food in return.

When one of the researchers told them about a housing protest planned for December 2009 by a group of shack dwellers from Grassy Park known as *Informal Settlements in Struggle*, they were keen to join and went as far as to inform other collectors they knew sleeping under the bridge in Maitland (just past Salt River). However, only three of the collectors came to the protest, which was itself called off because of the closure of streets in town for New Years Eve.

The combination of enthusiasm for collective action with little capacity to carry through campaigns which faces most movements for basic services like housing and water in Cape Town today will no doubt be a similar challenge for campaigns centred on street collecting. This group of collectors in town also seemed to know other collectors we had interviewed on the outskirts of Woodstock, including one couple whose daily route was from the city centre to the Salt River-Woodstock area. In this way, there seemed to be a network of familiar faces amongst collectors who live, and not just work, on the streets between Cape Town and Salt River. All of them were keen to gather and discuss the challenges they face in securing work and shelter.

This raises the point that one of the most vital ways of organizing reclaimers may be by forging links, and organizing overlaps, between waste pickers and other workers in the reclaiming industry – workers who may find it easier to act as a collective.

One of the most fruitful entry points to organizing could be with the workers on trucks, or "*bakkies*", which deliver waste collected by these buy-back centres. This includes offices with high paper volume like law firms, or for example Ryan Paper Company or I&J Steel (which were two instances mentioned by a worker at Uni-Scrap).

Companies with bulk waste make arrangements with the buy-back centres to collect directly from their premises, and there is a system whereby petrol costs are deducted. According to one worker, there are a few sellers with whom these buy-back centres have contracts and pay them monthly.

A second approach would be to include buy-back centre workers in organizing attempts. While some may be loyal to their employers at buy-back centres, there were workers willing to share information and insights into the industry with us, volunteering for interviews during their lunch breaks and providing views from a different entry point in their demanding daily schedules.

The challenge of organizing reclaimers is not only because of a special concern for a marginalized section of the working class, or the urban and rural poor. It is part of a greater historical challenge facing organized labour under neo-liberal globalization. As millions of workers are expelled from formal workplaces and as the “workplace” itself becomes a more flexible concept – including, in this instance, the street – what forms of organizing are appropriate to contest exploitation and to forge greater solidarity? The experiences of reclaimers involved in this project, and their voices, may help not only to illustrate the possibilities of their own self-organization but the possibilities of a greater working class unity.

## REFERENCES

- CORC Narrative Report to Ford Foundation on “Activities Carried Out Under EDAG Funding” (December 2004 – November 2005). KOLPING South Africa ([www.kolpingsa.co.za](http://www.kolpingsa.co.za))
- Gentle, L. (2004). *Economic Policy and Democracy: South Africa 10 years after apartheid*. Entraide et Fraternite: Brussels.
- ILRIG. (2001). *Is there an alternative? South African workers confronting globalization; PPPS: A questionable strategy for service delivery*. ILRIG: Cape Town.
- ILRIG. (2002). Globalization Series No. 6. *An Alternative View of Gender and Globalization*: Cape Town
- ILRIG. (2003). *Research into aspects of local government restructuring drawing on workers’ experiences*. Research report commissioned by SAMWU, SALGA and DPLG: Cape Town.?
- Qotole, Xali and Barchiesi (2001). . *The Commercialization of Waste Management in South Africa*, Occasional Paper No. 3. Municipal Service Project. Cape Town
- Statistics South Africa. (2007) Labour Force Survey September 2007 – Tsoga Environmental Centre and Recycling Depot ([www.urbansprout.co.za](http://www.urbansprout.co.za)).

## APPENDICES

### A. Synopsis of the Organizations Active Amongst Waste Pickers

#### 1. Community Organization Resource Centre (COURC)

The Community Organization (URBAN) Resource Centre (COURC) (alternatively the Community Organization Resource Centre (CORC)) is an NGO that provides support to networks of urban and rural poor communities who mobilize themselves around their own resources and capacities. CORC provides support to two different types of community networks. The first are networks of informal settlements that are mobilized around specific issues: usually land, evictions, basic services and citizenship. The second are women's collectives that are mobilized through savings. They try to bring a qualitative change to the way in which the organizations in the issue-based networks respond to the urbanization of poverty.

CORC supports issue-based networks in five metropolitan areas in the country and in one heavily populated rural district in the Eastern Cape. The communities in the urban networks come together to form the Informal Settlement Network (ISN). There are networks in the greater Johannesburg area, Ethekwini, Nelson Mandela Metro, Cape Town and Mangaung. The rural communities have come together to form the Alliance of Rural Communities (ARC). CORC's primary grassroots partner is the Federation of the Urban Poor (FEDUP). This is a national network of women's savings collectives that has mobilized extensively in informal settlements in all nine provinces. FEDUP has a loose alliance with another savings network known as Poor People's Movement (PPM). PPM is most active in Namaqualand and the Northern Cape but has expanded into several other provinces.<sup>24</sup>

CORC works with community-based initiatives through the promotion of saving schemes. It encourages engagement of community organizations with formal institutions, such as the state. CORC also works with the Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) an international network of slum dweller organizations.

CORC has been involved in arranging clean-up days, community food gardens and ornamental plants micro-businesses. It is working in partnership with local government on recycling and the cleaning up of shanty towns. CORC works with recycling and collection groups in Cape Town as well as with small businesses. It is also involved in the creation of a savings fund for land purchases or other collective efforts, and provides loans when state subsidies fall short. Members cannot withdraw funds without permission of the management committee. CORC has more recently become involved in getting communities to collect and sell glass recyclables.

The CORC manager involved in the recycling project, whom we interviewed, was interested in people getting money. He claims that "I have been looking at practical issues of improving peoples' livelihoods; many social movements pursue a political agenda that does not put food on the table". According to the manager it is not either/ or; both are needed, but he claims that his focus is strongly on income generation for the poor. In his view social mobilization runs into trouble when people feel there are no real benefits, and then there is disillusionment and demobilization. He further asserts that if you have both mobilization around environment issues and there are opportunities for income generation, then this is a win-win situation.

#### 2 Cart Horse Association

The Cart Horse Association is one of the organizations of waste pickers operating in the Philippi area. The Association receives support from the SPCA, which has concerns as to the well-being of cart-horses used by many waste-pickers in the Cape. The Association is found in an informal settlement called Sweet Valley Homes. The Association led to a group of women working as a

---

<sup>24</sup> Community Organization (Urban) Resource Centre

collective to collect bottles for recycling. When they started the project they were about 150 and now they are down to 20. This is an indication that there is much greater potential for organizing in the area. For the women we spoke to, their motivation to organize comes from a sense of injustice and exploitation: "We are working so hard and the owners are just paying paltry amounts of money". There would need to be interventions, however, to strengthen these existing structures.

### 3 Kolping

Kolping, South Africa, is a Catholic lay membership organization that seeks to empower its own members and members of the surrounding community to "reach their full potential spiritually, social and vocationally to promote the dignity of work". Their philosophy is "helping people to help themselves". The organization is named after the church priest, Adolf Kolping, from Germany, and is under the auspices of the St Andrews Catholic Church in Langa. The project is situated at Montana Primary School in Kalksteentfontein; it caters to youth and unemployed people in the community and the surrounding areas of Valhalla Park, Bishop Lavis, Langa, Bonteheuwel, Montana, Netreg, Golden Gate and Gugulethu. The Training Centre officially opened its doors on the 29th January 2004 and has thus far successfully trained 81 unemployed people in a variety of skills. Not all the training is done on site and they made use of a number of other institutions such as College of Cape Town Gugulethu Campus, Wave College, Athlone Technical College and North Link College.<sup>25</sup>

The sewing group is part of a small group within the larger Kolping group. Kolping Society is also involved in recycling. Participating families are found in rural and urban informal communities and are members of branches initiated at Parish/sub-Parish level.<sup>26</sup> Members of the families collect recyclable waste daily from their homes, streets and communities. Every week the recyclable waste is collected from all the families involved and sold in bulk to big recycling companies, like Consol. Each family receives an income based on the amount of waste collected and sold. The recycling project not only affords members the opportunity to make income from collecting waste but also raises awareness around the need to protect the environment and work towards cleaner communities. They have a site where they keep their collection of this waste.

### 4 Ikamva Labantu

Ikamva Labantu ("the Future of our Nation") is an NGO. It traces its roots back to the days of apartheid, when Helen Lieberman started working with women in the poverty-stricken townships around Cape Town. These compassionate beginnings led to a movement of social development that has grown into the organization it is today; an umbrella body with a network of over 1 000 projects working with various sectors of the population such as children, youth, families, seniors and those physically challenged. These projects aim to improve the daily lives of tens of thousands of the neediest people in South Africa. Masibambane is situated in A Section, Khayelitsha, and is an affiliate of this organization.

### 5 Masibambane (togetherness)

Masibambane is based in Khayelitsha and is an affiliate of Ikamva Labantu (people's future). The primary focus of Masibambane is to bring senior citizens together on various projects including craft work, life skills, food gardening and other health-related activities such as nutritional advice. Masibambane operates from a Municipality Resources Centre. Waste collection is an individual initiative, rather than an official project of Masibambane. Members of Masibambane were presented with a proposal by CORC to either engage in recycling or a soup kitchen project at a meeting organized by Poor People's Movement, of which they are members, and the recycling project was selected. They collect empty bottles everyday around Khayelitsha, mostly targeting places where there have been social functions like weddings and *imigidi* (initiation ceremonies). They need to ensure that this does not clash with Masibambane projects, and take turns or collect

---

<sup>25</sup> Kolping Society of South Africa. Source: <http://www.kolpingsa.co.za/>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid (fn 24) and telephonic communication with the receptionist on 22 June 2010.

when they are free or do not have materials for the project. CORC then collects these bottles from the waste pickers' houses every Thursday.

They have noted that they are exposed to various dangerous situations, such as rape, robbery and health hazards. They are interested to be in contact with organizations that will help them benefit directly from waste picking and expanding their project.

### **6 Masakhe Ubuzwe (Building the Nation) Community Project**

Masakhe Ubuzwe Community Project is a community-based project in Philippi-Gugulethu that decided to collect bottles for recycling. Mainly elderly and young women are involved in the project. They collect bottles and recycle them by making drinking glasses which they sell for R5 per glass. They ask CORC to transport the scrap bottles. Some waste pickers were dissatisfied with their leaders. There was a feeling that waste pickers were not getting enough proceeds from the projects and they could not really explain how any proceeds are shared.

### **7 Tsoga (Wake-up) Community Project**

Tsoga is a (Sotho name for wake-up) a community-based project established in 1993 to provide environmental education and training. It also had a recycling centre and a small market garden. They worked closely with local communities on issues such as littering, food gardening and greening of parks, a nursery, beading and weaving, sewing and glass recycling. The project aims to develop the capacity of unemployed women, who had no alternative means of survival. There are crafts available at the centre, some made from waste materials such as plastic bags. Tsoga no longer has the lease on the building, and a computer centre now uses the space temporarily.<sup>27</sup> The group now operates under a new name, Masithembane from a new venue in Samora Machel in Weltevreden Valley. It is continuing with the recycling project (see below).

Masithembane (trusting each other) was one such group of unemployed women. They were previously residents of Joe Slovo informal settlement in Langa, who had been involved in Tsoga's activities. They were subsequently moved into a newly established RDP housing section in Samora Machel in Weltevreden Valley. Masithembane currently has twenty women members mostly from the Samora Machel informal settlement and they are now an affiliate of the Poor People's Movement, which is a savings scheme, in Philippi. It was claimed by Masithembane that they are no longer generating income the same way they did under Tsoga. They claim that they are suffering at a time when food prices are so high and their lives are difficult. They also reported that they have water cut-offs in the area and they do not have protective clothing. People from CORC collect glass bottles every Friday. They do not know to whom or where they sell this glass. They also have to wait a long time for their payment. The group wishes to sell directly to the companies that their intermediaries are selling to, but unfortunately they do not know where those companies are located.

The majority of the group live in unpleasant and hazardous areas. The Samora Machel informal settlement is close to a dumping site, the area is filthy, with flies, filled with dirty water and sewerage flooding around their shacks. The organization group wants the Tsoga building back and is planning to fight the ANC people who evicted them. They want the City of Cape Town to provide them with protective clothing, wages and insurance benefits as they argue "we are cleaning areas that are meant to be cleaned by their workers or contractors". An organization of waste pickers is important to fight the abuse and exploitation from both buy-back centres and the city council. They feel that the already existing organizations should raise awareness among waste pickers.

### **8 Siyabulela (To Be Grateful) Group from Luzuko along the Lansdowne Corridor**

This is a 12 member group, involved in a recycling project. They keep their collection in a shipping container near Luzuko along the Lansdowne Road corridor. They collect glass bottles, cans and plastic in the surrounding areas of Philippi and Old Cross Roads. Their day starts at 7h30 until

---

<sup>27</sup> Tsoga Environmental Centre and Recycling Depot (source [www.corc.co.za/snailproject.html](http://www.corc.co.za/snailproject.html) )

about 16h00. They sell their collection to an intermediary who pays them far better than the previous intermediary. Their earnings have improved from R4 a load to R40 a load. They do not have their own transport or protective clothing. The group claimed that they are not covered by any laws of the country that would ordinarily be enjoyed by other workers. They have no unemployment or death insurance or any form of a disaster fund. They feel that the state should be providing these kinds of insurances to also cover them. The group is of the view that there is an urgent need to organize waste pickers around the challenges that they face. They see themselves contributing to the country's wealth and yet they are not valued for their efforts. One member of the group said "we need to organize waste pickers in other areas, so that our presence is felt by those in businesses and in government". The group feels that the conditions they work under are of concern; hence they see the need to organize, although they believe that language could pose a barrier when organizing.

## **B. Scoping Exercise Survey Form & Questionnaire**

### **Interview Questions for Focus Area Study**

*This is an in depth study in one area that explores how waste pickers in this area organize their daily work, whether and how they are organized more formally, how they relate to each other, whether and how they cooperate with each other, how they relate to other groups (such as street traders, security, local community groups, etc), whom they sell to, the challenges they face, and the possibilities and potential for collective organization.*

This will be an area we have already been to scope, so you may recognize or be recognized by people in the area.

In approaching reclaimers, introduce yourself and explain that:

- you are doing research on the work of reclaiming/collecting and are interested in what they are doing, how they do it, and why.
- it is part of a research project for an organization interested in informal work, and workers organizing for a better life.
- we have already spoken to reclaimers in XX area and would like to get a better idea of some of the issues they face in their work/lives.
- explain how long this interview will take, and how long you will be in the area for.
- ask if you can take their photo.
- leave them with an info sheet so that they can know more about the project, and contact us with questions about this project, and about getting involved in our projects/forums/etc...

You will need: question forms, clip board, pens, info sheets, camera, a recorder, and a reflection sheet to fill in at the end of each day. One person should be holding the recorder and asking the questions and maintaining a conversation posture (asking, listening, responding), while the other takes copious notes and can also ask follow-up questions. However, do not rely only on the recorder, since they often fail even if it seems to be working!

### **Questions for Researchers:**

Researchers' names:

Date & Time in the area:

What do you already know about the area and how work is organized here from previous visits/conversations?

Do a walk around and get a sense/map the area: where are the buy-back centres, the main roads, etc:

Describe what do you see/when. For example:

- who is reclaiming (gender, age, ability, in pairs or alone, language)
- what are they collecting
- how are they transporting it
- security issues
- dynamics between reclaimers
- dynamics between reclaimers and other people in the area

What do you want to find out today?

Take photos and write down the street/area/name of who is in each picture:

## Questions for Collectors:

### A) Personal information:

Name and contact info (please ask the person to choose a pseudonym if they prefer not to use their real name:

Age (please describe/guess, and note that you are describing/guessing if not forthcoming)

Gender

Language

Birth place (area/city/country)

How long you have been doing this activity

### B) Your working day:

1. How, when, and why did you start doing this kind of activity? What were you doing before?
2. Describe your typical day and the working conditions for reclaiming.
3. Interviewer: Add your own follow-up questions on the most important/interesting aspects of the day/routine/working conditions.

**Ensure you ask the following questions for clarity if they were not touched upon in the first open-ended question:**

- 4a. What areas do you collect in on which days?
- 4b. Why do you collect in these areas?
- 4c. What do you collect for selling? Why? [probe both formal and informal sales]
5. What do you collect for keeping? Why?
6. How much do you collect/earn each day? Min/Max.
7. Do you have any other form of income?
8. What are the factors that affect your earnings?
9. How long do you work each day? How many days a week?
- 10a. Whom do you sell to? (name/location of the centre/place/ethnicity of the buyer). How



would you describe your relationship with the buyer(s)?

10b. How often do you go there to sell?

10c. Why do you sell to this buyer / these buyers?

10d. Is it always you who goes there to sell what you collect or do you ever give your things to others to sell on for you?

10e. Do you sell things to these buyers for other people? If so, why do you sell for these other people? How often?

10f. Does everyone you know sell on in the same way?

10g. Who introduced you to the buyer or, if no-one introduced you, how did you find this buyer?

11. Describe your living conditions. Where do you live? How close is it to where you work? How long have you lived there?

### **C) How you see your work:**

12a. How long have you been collecting for? How has it changed over that time?

12b. Why did you start doing this work? How did you earn an income before you started doing this work? Why did you stop earning an income that way?

13. What do you call this kind of work?

14. Do you see yourself as a worker? Entrepreneur?

15. Would you like to be an employee of the municipality or of a formal recycling company? Why / why not?

16. How do you feel about this work? What are the best and worst parts? Does your family know what work you do? How do they respond?

17. Where do you see this work fitting into the larger economy? [in their perspective, what is the bigger picture or value chain that their work fits into, and how do they see the relationship between the formal / informal sectors related]

18. Have you felt that things have shifted / changed recently in this kind of work with the global economic crisis / recession? [probe changes in prices, quantity and types of materials in the past year and a half]

19a. Do you have any job security or any legal access to the sites from which you collect? How do you know you will have work tomorrow or next year?

19b. What do you see yourself doing in 2 years, 5 years, and 10 years from now?

### **D) Organizing:**

20. Who else collects around here? (women / men / young / old / foreign / race / ethnicity)? And how do people relate to each other?

21. How would you say reclaimers relate to other groups on the street, such as street traders, security, local community groups etc?

22. Gender: What would you guess is the percentage of men and of women doing this work in this area?

22b. What are the different roles that men and women take in this job? What is collected? Who does the selling? Working alone or in pairs? Times of day?

- 22c. What are the different roles that people of different ethnic groups (race/language/nationality) take in this job? What is collected? Who does the selling? Working alone or in pairs? Times of day?
- 22d. What tensions exist over these divisions or tasks/spaces/times of work?
23. How is your work organized? How do you decide what streets to work on? Must this be negotiated with others?
24. In what ways do people co-operate or compete with each other to do this kind of work?
25. How is it similar or different from other situations (work/social) you have been in in the past?
26. Do you work alone/co-operate with others in your work? How do you then distribute the proceeds? How do you decide who gets to go through the street first?
27. Is there room for negotiation over prices or ways of earning more money?
28. Are there middle men or committees or links with other collectors in this or other areas?
29. Do people ever pool their findings? Who takes it to sell? How do you divide the profit?
30. Has anyone ever tried to organize meetings, joint activities or an organization of reclaimers working in these areas? If yes, please tell me about this experience – what was useful and what was difficult? Did it last? If not, why not?
- 31a. Do you get any support from any agencies or organizations (religious, community, NGOs, welfare)? Describe this relationship.
- 31b. Why do you think this organization is involved?
- 31c. What role does this organization play in your work and in the relationship between reclaimers here?

## **E) Challenges and Solutions:**

- 32a. What are the benefits of this work?
- 32b. What are the challenges you face?
33. How do you currently address your problems?
34. What do you think should be done about these problems?
35. What are the possibilities and potential for collective organization?.
36. Have you ever been involved in a collective organization fighting for collective rights like a trade union or community group? If yes, tell me a bit about that experience and what was useful and what was difficult about it.

## **F) Closure**

37. Are we missing any important questions? Is there anything else you would like to add?
- 38a. Would you like to be contacted with information on forums/meetings of community organizations, labour, and social movements?
- 38b. For a follow-up meeting with everyone we interviewed?
- 38c. If yes, what is the best way to get hold of you?
39. Can we take your photograph? (note name, street/location, describe the person so you can match it to the photo).

Thank you very much.



## Organizing on the Streets: A Study of Reclaimers in the Streets of Cape Town

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

**About WIEGO:** Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global research-policy-action network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO builds alliances with, and draws its membership from, three constituencies: membership-based organizations of informal workers, researchers and statisticians working on the informal economy, and professionals from development agencies interested in the informal economy. WIEGO pursues its objectives by helping to build and strengthen networks of informal worker organizations; undertaking policy analysis, statistical research and data analysis on the informal economy; providing policy advice and convening policy dialogues on the informal economy; and documenting and disseminating good practice in support of the informal workforce. For more information visit: [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org).

**About ILRIG:** ILRIG is an NGO providing education, publications and research for labour and social movements in South and Southern Africa. Through ILRIG's education programmes and research it aims to bring the experiences of working and poor people in other countries to Southern African organisations, and to draw on this information to inform the search for alternative policies. Since 2002 ILRIG has convened an annual Globalisation School - a week-long event which draws activists from all over Africa and elsewhere to an occasion combining debate and learning and cultural events. In addition to publishing popular booklets on international issues, ILRIG also produces a quarterly newsletter called Workers World News. For more information, visit: [www.ilrigsa.org.za](http://www.ilrigsa.org.za)

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

