INFORMAL RECLAIMERS IN THE CONTEXT OF A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

WHAT ARE THE BIG WASTE ISSUES IN MOST AFRICAN CITIES?

African cities are confronted with complex environmental and socio-economic challenges. Continuous material production and consumption, coupled with inefficient waste management systems, have led to highly polluted African cities, affecting human and environmental well-being. These issues are embedded in the prevailing linear “take-make-waste” economic model that focuses on profit-making and benefits from high volumes of unsustainable material production and consumption.

Limited employment opportunities, which worsened with the Covid-19 pandemic, are key concerns for many Africans. Many residents have resorted to reclaiming high-value post-consumer products for recycling. For many, this is their entire livelihood. However, they are not recognised by formal stakeholders in the waste sector, and their activities are limited to the end-of-life stage in material value chains.

WHY DO WE NEED TO MOVE TO A CIRCULAR ECONOMY?

The momentum to shift to a circular economy has intensified globally and recently also in Africa. The circular economy approach encourages innovative design of products to eliminate waste and pollution. In this economic model, materials are retained in the economy for longer, while local natural systems are regenerated. A shift to a circular economy across various material value chains and sectors in the African context could create opportunities that will yield the necessary socio-economic transformation – sustainable jobs and cleaner and more liveable cities – and improve the economy of the continent.

WHY MUST AFRICA ENSURE AN INCLUSIVE TRANSITION?

The transition to a circular economy is necessary to adequately address the socio-economic and environmental issues and build resilient local systems in Africa. Specific consideration should be given to the many individuals in the informal waste sector whose livelihoods are linked to material value chains. An inclusive circular economy should start with recognising the important role played by informal reclaimers in diverting materials, which would otherwise end up in landfills or as pollution in nature. Then, African cities should explore ways to involve reclaimers in earlier stages of the product life cycle rather than only at the end-of-life stage.

RECLAIMERS IN AFRICA

Reclaimers (popularly known as “waste pickers”) play a significant role in local waste management systems. Their work usually fills in the widening gap between the formal waste management system and that of public and private recycling services. They divert materials such as plastic, cardboard, paper, e-waste and metal from residential and commercial spaces, landfills and illegal dumps. These materials are then reintroduced as secondary raw materials into the economy. The work done by reclaimers is labour-intensive, risky, unrecognised and undercompensated compared to similar work done by their formal counterparts.

The main cause for the continuing marginalisation of reclaimers is the absence of intentional policies that consider them as key role players in formal waste management and recycling systems. Also, the current linear economic model only focuses on end-of-life treatment methods such as landfilling and recycling, which limits reclaimers’ involvement in more circular initiatives.

Reclaimers’ input should be considered as early as the product design stage because of their on-the-ground experience from working with diverse materials. They know which products can be recycled or reused in practice and what the local infrastructure capacity is for doing so. Developing clear and explicit sector-wide mandates that align with reclaimers’ needs to participate in circular economy initiatives will position African cities for successful socio-economic transformation.
Reclaimers collecting waste in African cities are from a diverse spectrum of age, ethnicity, race and level of education. Most reclaimers are unskilled and illiterate, a few have a formal education and some have formal industrial work experience. Many of them have strong entrepreneurial ambitions, particularly within the emerging circular economy landscape.

**RECLAIMER CATEGORIES IN CITIES**

**DOORSTEP/KERBSIDE RECLAIMERS**
Reclaimers collecting waste outside people’s homes and from dustbins along the side of the road on municipal waste collection days.

**ITINERANT BUYERS**
Individuals who collect recyclables from households or businesses in exchange for payment or who barter from households, buyers, buy-back centres or recyclers.

**LANDFILL RECLAIMERS**
Individuals or groups who reclaim and sell recyclables from landfill sites or illegal dumpsites.

**ON-ROUTE/TRUCK RECLAIMERS**
Collection groups (predominantly formal) who segregate recyclables from household waste as a supplement to their salaries.

**SORTERS**
Individuals who select and sort recyclables by type from conveyor belts or manually (at small recycling plants).

**STREET RECLAIMERS**
Individuals who reclaim recyclables from mixed waste disposed in garbage bags and bins on streets or in dumpsters.

**ROLES FULLFILLED BY RECLAIMERS**

**SERVICE PROVIDERS**
Reclaimers manually sort and collect recyclable post-consumer materials from various waste sources, a responsibility that many cities battle to fulfil.

**ECONOMIC ACTORS**
Reclaimers recover and place a considerable number of materials into the recycling value chain, enabling the functioning of secondary markets.

**DRIVERS OF SOCIAL CHANGE**
Reclaimers create income opportunities, which helps to alleviate poverty in the large unemployed population in Africa.

**POLITICAL ACTORS**
Reclaimers advance social inclusion through organising themselves and advocating for recognition of their sector.

**ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDS**
Reclaimers reduce the leakage of post-consumer materials into the natural environment, in the process helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change.
BARRIERS TO THE SUCCESS OF INFORMAL RECLAIMERS IN AFRICAN CITIES

1 Negative connotations: Informal reclaimers have been – and are – exposed to unfavourable perceptions from the formal waste sector and society at large and are frequently subjected to negative or derogatory remarks.

2 Crime and criminalisation: Instances of criminals posing as informal reclaimers and committing unlawful acts in communities are common in African cities. Some secondary materials, such as scrap copper, often come from stolen electric wiring. At landfills, some reclaimers are forced to pay a portion of their earnings to gang members operating in surrounding areas.

3 Health risks: Reclaimers manually search through rubbish bins or bags for recyclable materials without even the minimum personal protective gear. This maximises their exposure to hazardous and toxic liquids and fumes and puts them at high risk of infections, injuries and long-term health problems.

4 Lack of basic social benefits: Reclaimers are also exposed to injury and fatalities, often linked to lengthy illnesses or as a result of being run over by vehicles while working in the streets of busy cities or at landfills. They also find it difficult to access healthcare.

5 Denial of access to materials: Some local authorities deny reclaimers access to salvaging recyclable materials.

6 Remuneration: Reclaimers are unfairly compensated and overexploited by middlemen and are at the mercy of unstable and complex material value chain markets.

OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS: INFORMAL WASTE SECTOR NETWORKS

NIGERIA
National Association of Scrap and Waste Workers of Nigeria

KENYA
Waste Pickers Association of Kenya
Kenya Association of Waste Recyclers

GHANA
Sarbah and Ablekuma Network
Kpone Landfill Waste Pickers Association

SOUTH AFRICA
South African Waste Pickers Association
African Reclaimers Organisation

UGANDA
Waste Pickers Alliance Uganda

Through such organised networks, reclaimers participated and were acknowledged in March 2022 at UNEA 5.2, where resolution 5/14 “End Plastic Pollution: Towards an international legally binding instrument” was adopted.
## Status Quo and Opportunities for a Successful Inclusive Circular Economy in African Cities

### Informal Waste Sector: Reclaimers and Reclaimer Organisations

**Status Quo**
- Disjointed efforts result in a lack of coordination and no unified position locally, nationally and internationally.
- Reclaimers work in poor and risky conditions that threaten their well-being and also their recognition by formal stakeholders.

**Opportunities**
- Strengthen organising efforts for a unified position across the sector and have a common goal at all levels, i.e. a body that advocates for the sector’s inclusion in formal systems.
- Establish minimum precautionary measures for all reclaimers to limit risks and attract support from formal (public and private) stakeholders.

### National Governments

**Status Quo**
- Current policies and strategies in most countries are not clear on how to include the informal waste sector in the waste management landscape, and who would be responsible for doing so.
- In most countries, there is a lack of partnership facilitation on the inclusive circular economy and other interventions that affect the informal waste sector.

**Opportunities**
- Enact strong policy and regulatory measures that specify the necessary support and parties responsible for including the informal waste sector in formal waste management systems.
- Facilitate partnerships between all relevant stakeholders, including the informal waste sector, across the entire material value chain. Ensure the sector’s involvement across the whole spectrum, from policy development processes to project implementation and monitoring.

### Local Governments / Municipalities

**Status Quo**
- Local governments hardly support integration or formalisation of reclaimers as a key intervention in formal waste management systems.
- Well-planned and well-maintained infrastructure for waste avoidance, reduction and management is lacking.

**Opportunities**
- Recognise and support the integration and formalisation of reclaimers. Contract reclaimers to provide waste collection and recycling services as a way to strengthen waste management systems.
- Facilitate funding, training and education, create infrastructure and build capacity for municipal officials to collaborate with reclaimers on projects.
PRODUCERS AND PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY ORGANISATIONS

STATUS QUO
▪ A philanthropic or charity approach that is presented as support for reclaimers does not result in significant transformation of the informal waste sector, nor does it relieve the pollution by post-consumer waste in the environment.
▪ There are insufficient partnerships and consideration of the informal waste sector in working towards a circular economy.

OPPORTUNITIES
▪ Recognise and support reclaimers through transparent remuneration for collected materials and pay them a service fee for collection.
▪ Consider and include inputs from the informal waste sector as a key stakeholder when designing products so that the products can be truly circular in local contexts.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND RESEARCHERS

STATUS QUO
▪ Projects are created to only tick boxes instead of meeting the needs of the informal waste sector.
▪ Data pertaining to the size and contribution made by the informal waste sector at local, national and continental level is lacking.

OPPORTUNITIES
▪ Align the needs of funded projects with those of the informal waste sector.
▪ Support and advocate for the development of databases that validate the size and contribution of reclaimers.

BUY-BACK CENTRES, BUYERS AND RECYCLERS

STATUS QUO
▪ Lack of transparency on pricing of different materials collected by reclaimers.

OPPORTUNITIES
▪ Establish a standard and more transparent pricing or payment system to ensure that reclaimers are not exploited for materials they sell.

ESTABLISHING AN INCLUSIVE CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN AFRICAN CITIES

To successfully build an inclusive circular economy, it is clear that reclaimers need to be recognised as key stakeholders who contribute significantly not only to the collection and recycling of post-consumer material but also to alleviating the socio-economic challenges faced in African cities.


This project was funded by Norad, through WWF Norway and supported by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Quaker United Nations Office. The views in the document do not necessarily reflect those of WWF Norway or Norad.