

Successful Joburg recycling pilot programme set to expand

Kickstarted in Auckland Park and Brixton, data from a Joburg-based recycling pilot programme has shown increases in the city's recycling rates, the number of households actively recycling, and has created much-needed income opportunities in the informal sector.



Two reclaimers help sort PET plastic bottles for recycling. A pilot programme in Joburg has helped solidify the reclaimer-resident relationship and empowered residents to recycle at home. (Image: Supplied)

Supported by organisations including the national body for PET plastic bottle recycling, PETCO, and the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO), work on the pilot programme, titled “Building an Inclusive Circular Economy: Recycling with reclaimers in Johannesburg”, began in mid-2019. More areas in Joburg are now expected to follow suit on the back of the project’s success.

Reclaimers harassed, ignored and misunderstood

The relationship-building initiative follows in the wake of reclaimers’ reports that they are often harassed, ignored and misunderstood by residents. It began with a survey of 50 reclaimers participating in the pilot to identify the working standards of the city’s informal recycling collectors – called “reclaimers” for their work to reclaim the value of items which would otherwise end up in landfills.

Before the survey, PETCO donated 100,000 clear plastic recycling collection bags – made from 100% recycled content – to ARO members to distribute to residents in their collection areas. Among the findings, the survey – which formed part of a baseline study – noted that 66% of the reclaimers said that providing households with clear plastic bags for recyclables increased the number of agreements they had with residents to save recyclable materials for them.



African Reclaimers Organisation members (from left) Eva Mbkoena and Luyanda Hatshwayo hand over recycling bins to Joburg's Bordeaux South suburb in early March 2020. The move was part of a pilot programme to solidify the reclaimer-resident relationship and empower residents to recycle at home. (Image: Supplied)

Further solidifying the reclaimer-resident relationship was a donation earlier in March this year of 400 recycling wheelie bins by Safripol – a manufacturer of high-density polyethylene and polypropylene plastic – which reclaimers in Bordeaux handed over to residents there.



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Reclaimers are entrepreneurs

“These reclaimers are entrepreneurs and extremely proud of the work they do,” said Belinda Booker, PETCO’s collections and training project manager. “They are up at 3am and walk long distances to collect recyclables. Not having to scratch through bags of general waste means they can collect more and earn more, with dignity.”

A resident, Angela Schaefer, who has been mobilising members of the Bordeaux South Residents Association, said many fellow residents were not actively separating materials or recycling materials before the partnership with the reclaimers was established.

“Now we have an easy way to do this while supporting industrious people who help our environment,” said Schaerer, adding that information about the programme was shared via WhatsApp, pamphlets and email newsletters and residents were seeing the benefits of a cleaner suburb thanks to the initiative.

“Previously, residents tended to ignore or harass reclaimers. Now people greet reclaimers, separate materials for them, provide refreshments, and take time to learn more about their work and their personal stories.”



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Awareness, information campaign

Since last year, the ARO has embarked on an awareness and information campaign in support of the recyclables separation programme, with workshops and clean-up activations at schools, universities and community events, ARO organiser Eli Kodisang said.

“Having a personal relationship [with reclaimers] makes residents more willing to separate their materials, as they understand the difference it makes to the daily life of the reclaimer and her or his family,” Kodisang said.

According to David Drew, a board director of PETCO representing brand owners, the pilot programme also meant that the materials collected were “cleaner and, as a result, easier to recycle”.

“Separation in the home is something that everyone can do. This is an organic African solution and deserves our support,” said Drew.

The pilot project is a joint initiative of the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO), Unilever, and the University of the Witwatersrand, with additional support and sponsorship from PETCO, POLYCO, The Glass Recycling Company, Fibre Circle, Packaging South Africa, Auckland Park Residents Association, and the Brixton Community Forum.

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