



Covid-19 dispatches: "It doesn't affect reclaimers only but also the environment"

GLC interviews **Steven Leeu**

Reclaimers are informal workers who collect recyclable waste around the city and transport it to recycling centres on trolleys which they pull themselves. In South Africa, they were not allowed to work during the lockdown, as they are not considered essential workers, and the High Court rejected an application in April to allow them to. Reclaimers have long said they are providing an essential service to the environment and subsidising municipalities' waste management as well as recycling companies. ARO organises reclaimers against harassment by the authorities, and in past months has been involved in discussions to integrate reclaimers into municipal waste management and recognise their contribution, as well as doing community outreach to residents in areas where their members collect recyclables.

*GLC interviewed **Steven Leeu**, a waste reclaimer and organiser for the African Reclaimers' Organisation (ARO) in South Africa, about how Covid-19 has disrupted their work and organising, what demands they are making during the crises, and what is happening to their pre-Covid campaigns.*

"This pandemic has affected our work quite negatively. My daily routine was to make sure that wherever the reclaimers are, or where they stay or where they drop off their [collections], I have to go there. I get called on a daily basis - you know they can get harassed by the law enforcement agency, they can have problems with the waste management companies - your so-called formal recycling companies, that actually take away their livelihoods - and that's where our work comes in to try and deal with all those kind of problems. So it has affected us a lot, in a way that at this present moment [11 May], the government waste department couldn't even issue a permit for us to be able to continue to organize or mobilise the reclaimers, and so [to deal with] the problems that would actually even come from other government departments, like Home Affairs.

I was called by Nedlac [National Economic Development and Labour Council, a statutory body which brings together

representatives from government, organised labour and organised business) to go and explain to them what are the issues that we are facing, and fortunately enough I managed to access a permit that would actually allow me to move around and continue with the work that I'm doing, along with three permits for my colleagues, who are now allowed to distribute parcels with these basic needs [such as food] for those who can't have as they can't be on the street collecting.

The challenges to the reclaimers are quite obvious: one, that the companies where they are supposed to sell their materials are closed, as per the government regulations and Covid-19; two would be that they're not allowed to be on the street anymore, to continue with the work that they're doing; and the most difficult challenge that they are facing, you know, reclaimers are actually staying in places where its nearer to where they collect their material, and they don't necessarily have family or kids with them. So you'll find there's someone in Johannesburg but he supports family in the Eastern Cape [province] through the material they collect, which is recyclables, and now they can't sell they don't have any source of income, for themselves where they are and for their family back at home, so that's the biggest challenge that we're facing.

Demands during the lockdown

As ARO we are trying to give food parcels that we get from good Samaritans, private companies and residents who are so generous that they feel the pain that the reclaimers are facing, so we are able to give them some food parcels, but the pain that even ourselves as ARO are feeling is that we are able to give them support, if not enough, but what about their kids back home? Hence we've been talking to government to make sure that the people get something to be able to send back to their family. Those are the challenges.

What demands have reclaimers put on the table at the moment? Reclaimers are those kind of people who wouldn't want to be given everything, they like work, they earn their

money through their hard work. So the demand they have put on the table is that government come up with a solution to deal with the issue of Covid-19, in a direct way. It doesn't affect the reclaimers only but it also affects the environment; if they are not going to be doing any retrieval, not collecting waste, we're filling up the location [township], the suburbs, everywhere, filling up the ocean and everything with waste.

The demands are also for government to give some water tanks where reclaimers would be able to wash their hands so they don't have to go and ask for water; and that they don't need to go outside and beg for food - I mean, you have to comply with all the regulations, the laws of Covid-19 [lockdown], but how can you stay indoors when you have nothing to eat?

The struggle for integration and recognition

Our struggle previously, before Covid-19, was for municipality to integrate reclaimers. We were busy drafting guidelines together with the National Department [of Waste Management], that the municipalities need to align themselves with, and the challenges that we were organizing about mostly was the fact that we need recycling hubs, we need to make sure reclaimers have enough spaces where they can store their materials and that they are able to have security and be able also - the most important thing - to have protective regulation. It doesn't make any economic sense if we are not regulated, to say that papers are this much at the shop, but [recovered] paper – the price is not regulated; if you take the reclaimers collecting all the waste paper, and we turn it into renewables, then it makes a lot of economic sense, but it doesn't make any economic sense to a person to be on the street collecting all that paper, working so hard, but at the end of the day, he gets almost close to nothing.

So we had industry and the department regulating prices, so that reclaimers are now being exploited. That is what we were actually organizing about, and that reclaimers must also be considered as workers. You look at the municipal workers, they get paid for collecting rubbish on the streets, each and every month they get paid, but someone who's pulling a trolley on the street is doing the very same work, and even more than the municipal worker, because they collect even from the kerb side, they collect anywhere where they can find a recyclable.

Those people are providing an essential service to our land and to government in general, but they are not being compensated for the work that they are doing, so that's what we've been fighting for - that government must recognize people.

And under recognition we talk about a lot of things. To recognize someone as a worker, you need to provide PPE, protective

clothing. Those people need to have a code where all the kinds of work are categorized. So that's a kind of organizing and fight that we have been having with government.

I suppose that these guys must say thanks to Covid-19 because even now we are still trying to push the engagement that we had, and we asked to have some zoom meetings to make sure that we continue, but they [municipality] have just put all of those things on hold because now they're looking into Covid-19. Minister Barbara Creesy [the national Minister of Environment Forestry and Fisheries] has been going all over the country giving food parcels to the reclaimers, and we tried to engage with her to say we need to make sure that the engagement we were having [over integration] doesn't fall off. She said we need to put everything on hold because of the pandemic. So now even local municipalities have put everything on hold: we were supposed to meet with Jo'burg municipality just before the lockdown and that meeting was postponed and we don't know what's going to happen. Are we still going to be on the same page, after this Covid-19?

Excuses and solidarity

In the city of Tshwane, because of political influences and political changes, the response that we are getting is that whoever was the head of the waste department is no longer there. City of Jo'burg is busy changing their officials. And so we are praying that whoever we are going to get now will still take us back, because what they usually do is tell you, I was not working with the city before, so you need to start afresh and explain again, and that's the excuse that they always given to us.

My last word will just be that I really appreciate what the residents in various areas of Johannesburg are doing for the reclaimers at this hard time in giving out to reclaimers and we encourage other community members to give reclaimers sanitisers, masks and so on to make sure they are all safe whilst they are cleaning our waste."

Steven Leeu is an organiser and member of the member-based African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO). He is also a reclaimer, collecting recyclable materials from household's rubbish bins and in business areas. Before this, he interned at the Johannesburg High Court, had to drop his studies at Vista University for financial reasons, and worked in a short term contract at a litho-printer before taking up reclaiming to step into his father's shoes after his father lost his job.

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