Trash Talk: The Quiet Revolution in Harare's Streets

By Tanatsiwa Dambuza

In Harare—a city that has long struggled to keep pace with its waste—cleaning the capital has become a story of two parallel efforts. One is formal. At Pomona, the country's largest dump site, a Netherlands-owned firm, Geo Pomona Waste Management, has since 2022 fenced the site, extinguished its fires, encapsulated decades of legacy waste, and begun door-to-door collection. The smoke that used to drift into Borrowdale is gone. The site is cleaner than it has been in twenty years.

The other effort is unofficial, older and quieter. Before dawn breaks, men and women fan out along the perimeter of Pomona, into the alleys of Mbare, and across the open grounds of Glen View, sorting plastic, cardboard, and metal by hand. They are neither contracted by the council nor are they funded by donors. They are the country's largest, most consistent recyclers, and they practise a form of grassroots African philanthropy that the development sector has yet to recognise.

Alpes Road runs through Harare's northern outskirts, about 16 kilometres from the CBD, and past the country's largest dump site. At half past four in the morning, it is dark and cold and already busy. A line of figures with woven sacks works on the spillover material that drifts beyond the fence. Tendai Chinhenga is one of them. He has been picking at and around Pomona for nine years. He used to earn about fifty US dollars a week by picking and selling the trash. When Geo Pomona arrived in 2022, gates were erected, closing out access to the area. He now picks the litter along the fence line, alongside many others who used to work inside. Their work is no longer as profitable as it used to be.

"Things are different now," he says, sorting clear PET bottles into one pile and coloured into another. "The smoke is gone. The big fires are gone. The odour is gone too. The site is clean. That is a good thing; I will not pretend it is not. But we are still here, on this side of the fence, doing what we have always done. The plastic does not stop because there is a company at the gate."

He sorts as he speaks. On a good day, he clears around ten US dollars from his plastic, sold to a middleman who feeds a recycling chain running through Harare's industrial sites and as far as South Africa. He put his younger brother through school by working in this trade. He still works without gloves.

"They say the new company will employ hundreds of people," he says. "There were more than a thousand of us before. Hence, hundreds are not employed; we are still working. We just need someone to see us."

The arithmetic is striking. Harare generates an estimated 1,000 tonnes of solid waste a day, and even with formal collection scaling up, household-level recovery remains the work of the informal sector. The country's official recycling rate sits in the low single digits, but the real figure, including the informal economy, is considerably higher. In a privatised system, the pickers are not redundant; they serve as the layer below, performing street-level sorting that no formal operator can match in terms of cost.

By the time the sun climbs over Harare, the picking economy has shifted into the city itself. A few kilometres from Pomona, in Mbare, a different operation has the same shape. Patience Mutonhori works the streets where the buses unload. She is forty-five, widowed, and a mother of four. Her shift begins at six and ends when her sacks are too heavy to drag. She specialises in cardboard, stockpiled in a rented yard and sold by the kilogramme to packaging buyers when the price is right.

"My oldest finished Form Four because of this rubbish," she says. "My husband died in 2016, and the relatives wanted to take the children. I refused. I came to Mbare. I started with one sack. Now I have three women working with me. We pool our cardboard. We are a company without papers."

She laughs, then abruptly stops. “The police chase us sometimes. The council comes and burns our cardboard if we have not paid the right person. We are doing the work, and we are punished for it. If I were a foreign company doing the same thing, they would give me a ribbon.”

Asked what she would change first, she did not hesitate to respond. “A roof. A small yard with a roof, somewhere I can put my cardboard when it rains so it does not get too heavy. That is the difference between thirty dollars and fifteen dollars a week. A roof.”

Three thousand miles from her yard, Patience handles the same materials at the centre of a planetary crisis. The world produces more than 400 million tonnes of plastic each year, and only about 9 per cent has ever been recycled. Nearly four-fifths has accumulated in landfills, dumps, or the natural environment. Between 19 and 23 million tonnes leak into aquatic ecosystems annually, accounting for 85 per cent of all marine litter. Africa contributes a small fraction of production but absorbs a disproportionate share of the consequences. Across the continent, grassroots picker networks are the de facto recycling system, and their work has kept catastrophe at bay for two decades.

The question is not whether the pickers matter. It is whether anyone has been listening.

An environmental lawyer who has worked on municipal waste policy in Zimbabwe for over a decade and who asked to remain anonymous due to the sensitivities around the Pomona concession confirms they have not.

“We have been treating waste pickers as a social problem when they are an environmental service. A privatised operator can take Pomona to a much higher standard, and that is welcome. But the informal sector is still doing the layer that the operator does not reach. The pickers and the company are not in competition. They are in partnership, whether anyone has written it down or not.”

She points to models being implemented in cities far less wealthy than Harare. Bogotá pays its waste pickers as service providers under a constitutional court ruling. Pune integrated its picker cooperative into the municipal contract. Accra is moving in the same way. “It is not radical,” she says. “It is what cities do when they stop pretending the informal economy is invisible.”

Across town, in the City Council offices, the conversation is beginning to shift. A senior officer in Harare City Council’s Department of Works concedes the obvious, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the ongoing concession review.

“Pomona has improved. We acknowledge that. The Geo Pomona team has done what we could not. But the household-level separation in our high-density suburbs is work the informal sector does and will continue to do. The question is how we recognise that work and make it safer. The direction is clear. Doing nothing is not an option.”

Doing nothing has costs. A picker working without gloves, boots, or a face mask is exposed to medical waste, broken glass, soiled sanitary products, and the heavy metals that leach from discarded electronics. Harare’s recurring cholera and typhoid outbreaks are partly caused by broken sanitation, with uncollected and unsorted waste remaining central. As the formal sector scales up at Pomona, the informal sector is absorbing more of the street-level risk, not less.

By the time the morning shift winds down, Tendai’s sacks are full. He sits on an overturned crate and pulls back the cuff of his shirt to show a long, healed scar from his wrist to his elbow. “Broken glass,” he says quietly. “Two years ago. I went to the clinic, and they asked me how it happened. The nurse said I should find another job. I asked her about what other job she was considering. She did not answer. That is what I want from a foundation. Not pity. Gloves. A roof over the sorting place. Papers so I can sell directly. Give me those three, and I will employ ten more people next year.”

What would a serious African philanthropic response look like? Not another awareness campaign. Not another branded bin. It would begin with what the pickers have been asking for. Protective equipment is first,

inexpensive at scale, and lifesaving for the individual worker. Then, covered storage yards where pickers can stockpile and negotiate better prices. Then, direct connections to recycling buyers to ensure that the margin captured by intermediaries flows back to those who are doing the sorting. Then, cooperative registration and legal status will unlock bank accounts and enable waste pickers to work formally alongside the city and its private partners.

The Zimbabwean philanthropic sector, much of it under pressure from the Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Act, is wary of programmes that look political. Waste picker organising is not political. It is economic and environmental. A Zimbabwean foundation, a diaspora-funded trust, a church-based fund, or a corporate social investment from one of the recycling buyers downstream could fund the infrastructure of picker cooperatives at a cost trivial against the value of the materials recovered. The PVO Act does not prohibit it. The Geo Pomona concession does not preclude it. The pickers are not waiting to be rescued; they are already at work.

At the close of his shift, Tendai weighs his last sack and stacks it for the buyer. The sun is up. The smoke that used to hang over this part of the city has disappeared, and the air smells fresh. For the first time in many years, the air feels fresh. Inside the fence, a Dutch-built operation is delivering what was promised. Outside it, men and women in worn trainers have delivered what no one ever asked of them for two decades.

Two efforts working in parallel are now assembling a cleaner Harare. One has fences, electric gates, and a thirty-year contract. The other has woven sacks, bare hands, and an inheritance of community giving that goes back generations. The first has recently begun and is delivering visible results. The second has been underway for twenty years, unfunded, unrecognised, and unstoppable.