
Project Title: WiFi for WiFi's Sake is Not Enough:
Hyper-Local Content and Employment Innovation Drive Citizen Engagement

Project Description:

Since 2013, Project Isizwe has facilitated free internet connectivity for over 3.5 million South Africans. TshWi-Fi - the flagship project in the City of Tshwane - helps citizens access the online world via 1050 Free Internet Zones (FIZ) situated in public spaces - at schools, healthcare facilities and community centres - predominantly serving the low-income communities living and working in the City's townships. Project Isizwe's TshWi-Fi network remains the largest Free Public WiFi network on the African continent.

Over the last year, Project Isizwe has embarked on a strategic shift towards enabling the sustainability of Free (to end user) WiFi. Project Isizwe advocates for Free WiFi as a human right, lobbying that connectivity should be a government provided service just like water and electricity. The reality is that we are not there yet. While Project Isizwe flies the advocacy flag, the other important work in the Free WiFi space is innovation.

Through innovative partnerships, Project Isizwe is making exciting strides to enable the sustainable provision of WiFi for those who needed it most and for whom it is least accessible. Against the backdrop of #DataMustFall, Project Isizwe is collaborating with multiple stakeholders to innovate the business model - to mix up and increase the income streams - to cover costs and extend the coverage.

Interstitial advertising has been added to enable an income stream. The unique offering - Afri-Fi - gives clients access to an emerging market that is traditionally very hard to access on digital platforms. Further innovation has been added via the Khaye-Fi project which goes beyond the provision of WiFi, and as an innovative learning-led project, is at the forefront of pioneering an impactful model: providing WiFi and empowering content and learnability opportunities, while building out a replicable and scalable business model. Khaye-Fi is sustained through multiple income streams, including exchanges of recycling, and online micro-learning and content consumption, to 'pay' for the WiFi. In the Khayelitsha township, just outside Cape Town, citizens are cleaning up their environment and learning - exchanging these 'affordable' alternative currencies for WiFi.

WiFi for WiFi's sake is not enough. Project Isizwe aims to deploy ubiquitous internet access, supplying connectivity as an enabler for education and training, employment, job creation and entrepreneurship, and economic development; ultimately enhancing the lives of individuals while contributing to social justice. An unlimited access content portal provides Project Isizwe users with relevant and hyper-local news, and educational and empowering content seconds after they log on. The digital content is tailored to users, created and curated specifically for the particular audience of the network, in a way that no international or even national site can provide. Education, entrepreneurship, active citizenship and hyper-local news and entertainment content keep users engaged, informed and coming back for more, filling the gap that traditional media outlets cannot fill. The platform takes advantage of the high prevalence of mobile phones (92%) and increasing penetration of smartphones (69%), to address the digital divide ([only 50% of the total population are mobile internet users](#)), creating a unique distribution channel that actively changes lives.

A critical aspect of the content delivered by Project Isizwe's portal is that produced by the local news network of citizen journalists who create hyper-local, video-on-demand, digital news videos that stream to users - for free - via the portal. These citizen journalists give a voice to their communities in the digital world: relevantly covering integritous local news, authentically documented for the local community by local journalists.

The citizen journalists participate in a developmental training model that formally facilitates learning and skills development for the young media producers. More than 30 citizen journalists have been trained, with their employment facilitated through this Project Isizwe initiative. The empowering model encourages and guides the local citizen journalists to seek out stories that are important to them and their communities.

The successful and impactful CO4ZA Ambassador programme comes from humble beginnings: In 2015, the Free Wi-Fi Champions programme was developed as a network of young people promoting the use of the Tshwane Free WiFi network on the ground across the City of Tshwane. The purpose was to support citizens and drive up usage on the network. The Champions facilitated hotspot site activations and hands-on interaction to convert potential users into active and engaged users. The original programme was incredibly successful in enabling the growth of the TshWi-Fi network, now more than 3.4 million users strong.

Following the huge success of the Free WiFi Champions Programme, Project Isizwe realised a number of key things, primarily related to the fact that South African youth have an incredible energy around wanting to engage with other South Africans in order to help empower them. Project Isizwe decided to take the programme further; continuing to enable citizens and communities to use technologies like smartphones and WiFi to improve their lives.

In 2016, through the ReadytoWork programme - a project enabled by Barclays - Project Isizwe was able to continue the development of the programme, moving away from a pure focus on growing network usage to directly facilitating users' accessing the online Work Readiness programme. No longer just 'Champions', the growing network of young people became Ambassadors advocating for and promoting the true value of WiFi as the enabler for access to life changing resources and content. The programme successfully enabled more than 26 000 people to directly connect with online work-readiness training. Working with the team behind the free safety app, Namola, the programme has also helped connect citizens to safety by facilitating more than 73,000 downloads and registrations of the app.

With a focus on enabling development in South African communities, CO4ZA - Communities for South Africa - empowers people to adopt technology - and the benefits thereof - into their lives. The CO4ZA Ambassador Programme is a growing network of young and passionate South Africans who host and participate in ongoing activations, educational programmes and grassroots promotional work in the heart of communities and at events. CO4ZA is a learning-led approach to growing young young people with the focus: values first, then skills. Through the facilitation of a values-based training and development programme young people become self-aware, reflective and mindful lifelong learners. The programme enables young people to do important, necessary and socially impactful work, contributing to developing capacity in local communities. Furthermore, CO4ZA helps young people discover their earnability by providing opportunities to begin participating economically.

From its humble beginnings as the Free WiFi Champions programme, the CO4ZA Ambassador Programme is fast becoming a compelling development and business model, providing an innovative and alternative solution for South Africa's employment crisis, with the ultimate goal of enabling social justice and economic inclusion for young South Africans.

Supporting documentation:

Videos: <https://vimeo.com/231681569> and <https://vimeo.com/231677346>

Websites:

<http://www.htxt.co.za/2015/02/25/why-citizen-journalism-is-important-to-project-isizwe-and-its-400-000-users/>

<https://co4za.thesocialcollective.co/>

