

# Sustainable initiatives

An Information and Communication Technology case study

## Digital Village, Soweto, South Africa

Community based training centre

**Soweto**  
**Digital**  
**Village**

### **Introduction**

This case study has been generated as part of a research programme into Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sustainability factors. Funded by the [Department of International Development \(DFID\)](#), the research programme identified activities that sought to benefit the poor and had an ICT component. In particular it considered programmes where ICTs had enhanced ongoing development activities, the ICT activity could be replicated without sizeable investment, and there was a measure of sustainability. Sustainability was taken to be more than financial cost recovery. Drawing from lessons learned in other development sectors, sustainability involves a combination of factors including among others, clear objectives, institutional frameworks, local capacity and development benefits. While perhaps not fulfilling all the features of a strong sustainable activity, the following case was felt to hold points of interest for the wider global development community.

### **Description of case Study**

For more than four years the Soweto Digital Village has been providing technological access and much-needed training in computers to the previously disadvantaged communities of Soweto. During these years, the needs of the community have presented new and significant challenges in bridging the information technology gap, which exists among the communities. At the same time, the communities can benefit if advances in information technology are used to serve as a vehicle for skill development, job creation, information access, improved communications, and collaboration. The Soweto Digital Village project is an initiative by the private, public and the community sectors, which is aiming at providing the community with access to and training in information and communications technology.

The centre provides the surrounding communities, schools, students and local entrepreneurs the opportunity to develop their computer skills, access to information and communication technology and take advantage of the power of the Internet. Housed in a community centre and owned by the local municipality, it pays for some of the services it receives from it. The centre is primarily a training site for computer literacy. It offers training on software applications, with Microsoft products enjoying centre stage. Other packages are also offered, depending of the availability of sponsorships and appropriate training.

Currently there are only three projects running, with one (Galeshewe) at the verge of closure. This case study looks mainly at Chiawelo Community Centre.

The purpose of this study is to identify those aspects in programming that contribute towards youth employment (and, consequently, the sectors in which success is evident).

### **Key Strategies**

Through community telecentres to provide training in and access to information and communication technology to previously disadvantaged communities.



Photo 1: IT Training Workshop

## ***Development benefits***

Emphasis is on unemployment and the potential of getting a job with computer skills. There is ample evidence that the trainers move into business. The number of people is relatively small.

In its first year, the Soweto Digital Village equipped more than 500 kids and young adults with the computer skills they will need to compete in today's job market.

Other users are discovering that the computers can support small businesses and promote activities like community meetings and local cultural events and workshops. People are even linking to online courses at universities around the world.

## ***Hindrances***

Technology:

The equipment was donated by Microsoft and other leading IT companies. Although it was up to date at the time, it soon became dated. This meant that students were learning outdated operating systems and software. A big challenge for the centre to cover replacement costs and thereby keep up to date.

Socio-economic:

Of the six digital villages that were started three have already folded. One of them was cleaned out by robbers and the other two did not succeed financially.

As with so many other telecentres Chiawelo continually loses its technical and training personnel. They see this as part of their success in that they have targets of getting unemployed people employed. However, in day to day terms it means they spend time training somebody, upgrading their skills only to have them leave and find a better job soon after.

## ***What helped it Succeed***

Technology:

The use of standard computer equipment enabled service and support to be found locally.

Socio-economic:

Close connections with the community have meant that security at Chiawelo Centre has not been an issue.

Chiawelo has a strong 'champion manager'. The founder and current manager is very dedicated working all hours and strives to keep the centre running under difficult conditions. Alongside the Board of Trustees he has continually reviewed strategy and evolved to maintain a working and feasible model.

## ***Sustainability factors***

### ***Objectives***

Key strategy is to be obtained by

- Bringing technology closer and within reach of the communities through collaborative efforts of the community, the private and public sectors.
- Providing access to and use of information technology resources to the community in an affordable but sustainable way.
- Building capacity and empower the community members with information technology skills, which they can apply to improve the quality of their lives.
- Increasing the level of understanding of Information Technology and its role in society.
- Accelerating the local economic growth through application of the computer skills learned by providing technology resources to the community.

Promoting the integration and use of technology in education

### ***Policy environment***

Current policy have not been enacted by law. National government have facilitated a positive policy environment for projects such as the centre. For instance, they can now apply for registration as



Photo 2: Computer Resource Center

accredited learning providers. This also opens other benefits such as state subsidies, contracts and subsidised learners under special conditions.

In August 2001, Soweto Digital village was registered as an organisation under section 21 of the company's act.

### *Institutional arrangements*

The small staff complement, consisting of the director (who is the chief trainer) a second trainer and part time workers offering administrative support is responsible for the programmes offered by the centre. They are supported by a board of directors who provide governance to the centres. The board members are all residents of the target area.

Although learners have various activities outside of the learning programmes, these are not formally instituted, because there is no learner co-ordination at the centre.

Having been sponsored by Microsoft and a number of other companies they consider each of those companies a stakeholder who must be consulted before strategic changes are made. In 2000, Africare commissioned an independent evaluation which was designed to enhance the operation and build capacity. Regularly 6 month reports are sent to the major stakeholders.

### *Target groups*

The centre gives surrounding communities, schools, students and local entrepreneurs the opportunity to develop their computer skills, gain access to information and communication technology and take advantage of the Internet. People sign up for membership which gives a range of services



Photo 3: Training in Progress

including internet access and training opportunities. The emphasis on membership (and membership fees) was to encourage financial sustainability. However, recently the stakeholders have requested a change of policy to make the centre more open to 'the man on the street'. Also the members tend to be drawn from throughout Soweto rather than the immediate surroundings.

In the beginning there was a community consultation and in theory the community has always been a stakeholder in the project. In the last couple of years the community has shown an increasing sense of responsibility for the project.

### *Technology*

The centre is equipped with standard PC technology, including computers, Internet access and the latest Microsoft software and books.

35 computers networked using Windows NT connected permanently to the internet. At any given time approximately 15-20% of the computers have some

### **Anecdote**

Secretary Powell praised the project by saying, "This is the kind of investment we need to prepare young people for the future. In its first year, the Soweto Digital Village has equipped more than 500 children and young adults with the computer skills they need to compete for the jobs that are waiting for them in the 21st century economy. More digital villages are opening every year...so much promise, so much progress here in South Africa and across the continent."

"All sorts of people use the digital villages to improve their skills. In the morning, we typically see unemployed youngsters who use the equipment to teach themselves new skills. In the afternoon, school teachers and school goers come to complete projects and update their PC literacy. In the evenings it's open season - all kinds of people of any age use the facility," says Joe, the centre manager.

### **Points of Interest**

Security of telecentres is often a problem. One centre in Soweto set up in 2000 was robbed at gunpoint within the first two months and then had three more minor robberies over the following nine months. Chiawelo has survived because of its close connection to the community and its integration with a hall, a cafeteria and a library, which together make a useful and useable community centre. There is a constant flow of community members using the centre for a wide variety of activities and this has put the IT component in a context to which the community can relate.

problem. Following a visit by Colin Powell in 2001 compac donated 20 top of the range computers.

All the technology has been donated by large companies. Most of which is brand new.

### **Finance**

The sponsorship from Africare and Microsoft accounts for the bulk of financial income of the centre, with the remaining amount coming from user charges.

The sponsors have played a role in the level and extent of development of all centres. It appears as though the original contract between the sponsor and the agency determined the developmental path of each centre, with each centre's leadership tasked with attaining self-sufficiency within certain timeframes.

Currently they do not have funding to a level that is anticipating the need to upgrade or replace machines. They are dependent on further donations. Currently they are undertaking a strategic review to see if membership fees should be increased to try and account for this.

### **The project process**

The initial community consultation was followed by a slightly donor driven creation of a resource centre. The role of Africare as an INGO who understands the need for communities to buy in to projects should not be underestimated.

Project ownership is now firmly in the hands of the local community with a local board of trustees. Although the donating companies are still considered 'stakeholders'.

### **Key linkages**

The centre does not belong to any significant network of any kind. The level and intensity of collaboration and engagement with other entities is negligible.

The role of the local council or municipality was not clear in terms of strategic support. It seems that councils were not properly briefed regarding the strategic importance of these centres in terms of human capital development.

The centres all had some partnerships with business, though these do not appear to be well exploited.

They are linked in with other Digital Villages outside of Soweto.

### **Capacity**

Most employees are graduates of Digital Village. They become members, gain increasingly complex computer skills then become volunteer workers and trainers and when one of the employees leaves to get a job in business the volunteers take a salaried position.

### **Stakeholders Consulted**

This case study information has been gathered through the assistance of Soweto Digital Village staff, who facilitated interviews with the centre manager and a selection of staff and clients.

Sustainable Initiatives is an output of a co-operation between [Gamos Ltd](#) and [Big World](#) for the distribution of practical research information.



**DFID**

This document is an output from a project funded by the UK [Department for International Development \(DFID\)](#) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the DFID.

This document is based on reports prepared by Sydney Thipe, and Mike Webb of Big World.

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