



IDEA LAB

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Johannesburg Libraries as Change Agents for the Homeless: Digital Literacy Programs for Marginalized Communities

The Human Sciences Rescue Centre estimated that by 2020, South Africa had 200,000 unhoused people, who lose their homes due to a variety of factors, including housing shortages, unemployment, and rapid urbanization. The 2020 employment rate in South Africa was estimated to be at 29 percent, with the COVID-19 pandemic leading to an increase in job losses. The city of Johannesburg, with a population of more than 4 million, is home to an estimated 15,000-plus homeless people.

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The city of Johannesburg (COJ) libraries directorate under community development is mandated to offer a wide range of programs and services focused on poverty alleviation, safety and security, inequality, homelessness, illiteracy, and general skill development (including ICT skills), among other issues. In addition to traditional physical spaces and programs, COJ libraries introduced eLearning Services to ensure the inclusion of Johannesburg residents in the digital society and to enable social cohesion. In COJ libraries, eLearning services

are defined as the support and access provided by the libraries through the availability of information and communication technology (ICT) tools. eLearning services consist of free Wi-Fi, eLearning classrooms with laptops in selected libraries, desktop computers with public access to the internet in 60 percent of libraries, and digital literacy training. More than 300,000 library users have accessed the eLearning services (excluding those accessing free Wi-Fi outside the library walls) since 2016.

Digital Literacy for the Homeless

In 2019, as part of Librarians Day celebrations, the COJ libraries eLearning unit encouraged librarians from different regions to address digital inclusion, particularly for marginalized communities such as senior citizens, the homeless, and the physically challenged. This movement was also in response to the UN call for libraries to meet Sustainable Development Goal 11—Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Johannesburg is an industrial city with a multicultural community, migrating from different South African regions and surrounding countries, mostly in search of jobs or business opportunities. Some of them face challenges and become homeless; unemployment is the main cause of homelessness in Johannesburg. Randburg Library, situated within a busy municipality center, is one of the COJ regional branch libraries that embraced the idea of assisting marginalized communities. Randburg Librarian Mr. Matete Lesele had observed

that some homeless individuals frequented the library to read newspapers. He decided to approach a few of the gentlemen and introduced them to the computers and internet under a program he termed Project Masterplan, aimed at giving them a purpose of reintegrating them to society. Through word of mouth, the group increased to between 10 and 15 individuals daily. Mr Lesele introduced them to online courses, job hunting skills, and finding articles to read online. He also attempted to engage other external stakeholders to fund sponsorships for food parcels or clothes. This project was at its early stages, and it was disrupted by branch library closures on the March 27, 2020 due to COVID-19 lockdown regulations.

COVID-19 has not only affected this group of the homeless, but it delayed plans to further expand the program to other libraries. While awaiting libraries to fully reopen for all services, the eLearning unit is drafting a revised plan for introducing digital skills to the homeless in various regions where they can gain job-hunting skills, access motivational content, and be part of the community by visiting libraries.

Funding for public libraries is generally a challenge, and therefore COJ Libraries are also constantly searching for sponsorships to support the marginalized communities' program, particularly for post-COVID-19 library services that will involve the use of technology.



Figure 1. Houseless People Using WIFI Outside the Library



Figure 2. Seniors from the Library's Computer Skills Training



Figure 3. Brainstorming at the Goethe Institute on Librarian's Day

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