
Awards Category: **1. Best Wi-Fi Deployment to Connect the Unconnected in Rural Environment**

Project Title: **Innovative solutions bring rural Limpopo online**

Project Description:

Limpopo, South Africa's northernmost province, is home to 10% of the country's population and despite the beautiful landscapes and rich wildlife, Limpopo remains the poorest province in South Africa. With poverty at 78%, the expansive region still has more than 70% of its population living in tribal and traditional dwellings, following a largely rural lifestyle. 97% of the province's population is black; the highest percentage in South Africa. Limpopo's developing economy depends on the exporting of primary agriculture and mining products.

In the context of South Africa's political past, Limpopo is undoubtedly one of the outlying areas where people continue to live in the reality of 'previously disadvantaged'. The extreme poverty, coupled with the typical challenges prevalent in rural areas, means Limpopo remains a province where the majority of the population are exceptionally restricted and limited with few to no opportunities available to help them break the cycle of disempowerment.

It is here, in this top corner of rural South Africa, that the non-profit organisation Project Isizwe is innovatively partnering with Facebook's Internet.org to provide internet access to the low-income communities. The deep ruralness of Limpopo has always posed the challenge of enabling internet access in this province. Wired and mobile connectivity options are both as unreliable as they are unlikely, with satellite being the only option available for a more stable connection. In late 2014, an initial roll out of 10 Free Internet Zones (FIZ) enabled groundbreaking work to begin in rural Limpopo, allowing more than 11 000 people to access high speed internet for the first time.

Although an exciting opportunity to take a big step towards bridging the digital divide, the reality in the rural villages where the first phase of deployment took place was low uptake and unsustainable usage of the Facebook Free Basics services by the people deemed to need it most. Technical and infrastructural challenges in rural deployment aside, what's harder to change - and more complex in rural deployment - is convincing people who have never accessed the internet before that it is a valuable, essential service that they need.

Project Isizwe's Limpopo deployment - in collaboration with and enabled by Facebook - continues to be a project of great organisational learning. Now armed with improved capacity to effectively put in place satellite connectivity in rural Africa, Project Isizwe is working to overcome the human aspects of bridging the far more complex digital divide in the area. Compounded by a more general and dire sense of 'underdevelopment',

innovation is now about educating people, growing their knowledge about what the internet is and nurturing their curiosity to get online so that they can begin to want the service they don't yet know they need.

Project Isizwe has joined the global movement, lobbying for internet as a human right. But this is only feasible, and even valuable, when recipients and users can genuinely feel the benefits and have their lives and circumstances improve. Facebook Free Basics provides free, unlimited access to important and essential resources on the internet, facilitating access to education, health and employment opportunities that users would otherwise not have. The 2016 deployment which will see at least 40 sites come online, with the potential to grow into the hundreds, has transitioned from the initial Free Basics provision to include the Express Wifi offering. The Express Wifi model is fundamentally different: by putting a local reseller or entrepreneurial agent at the centre of a user's interaction with the connected world, new opportunities for development emerge.

Across South Africa, Project Isizwe has delivered training and development programmes to almost 700 unemployed youth. Express Wifi will expand the model and extend the impact, while simultaneously enabling a more sustainable way in which to provide stable internet and promote local business. Working to enable internet access through resellers and entrepreneurs, young people are being given the opportunity to work as WiFi agents who actively work in the FIZ areas, selling Express Wifi and supporting users as they navigate the online world. The agents themselves are beneficiaries of the programme's training; they are upskilled and given access to the internet while being enabled to earn an income, many of them for the first time.

The reach extends as these agents sell affordable, and reliable connectivity to members of their communities who are in turn educated about the internet and shown how to access a range of empowering information and services including education, health and employment opportunities.

Together with the Free Basics portal, the innovation of the Express Wifi deployment is a necessary enabler, bridging the education gap while providing additional opportunities to Project Isizwe to develop solutions to help address South Africa's critical skills shortage and employment problems. In the physical provision of internet, there is a necessary but equally beneficial step enabling unemployed young people in the poorest province of the country to earn an income, build their skills and begin to contribute economically.

Although Project Isizwe is primarily mandated to provide WiFi in low-income communities across South Africa, contributing to overcoming the country's education and employment challenges is key to the organisation's sustainable impact. The innovative application of Express Wifi in rural Limpopo is laudable as thousands of the poorest South Africans gain access to the internet, education and employment.