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Case Study: **Bridging the Digital Divide through the SEF**

Contributors: Thula Zondi | Margo le Roux | Pascale du Toit



The Social Employment Fund is leveraging digital innovation to tackle unemployment, digital exclusion, and economic inequality in South Africa's underserved communities. This case study highlights how the SEF has moved beyond traditional public employment by equipping participants with digital skills, devices, connectivity, and access to technology-enabled opportunities across sectors such as community safety, agriculture, education, healthcare, and the creative economy. This case study demonstrates how SEF is creating pathways to employment, entrepreneurship, and social impact while building a scalable model for inclusive participation in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Programme Context



The Social Employment Fund (SEF) supports initiatives that deliver meaningful work while addressing structural challenges in communities.

Within this framework, the SEF works together with the Strategic Implementing Partners (SIPs) to achieve this at grassroot level.

A SIP is a civil society organisation contracted through the SEF to design and deliver socially beneficial work opportunities in communities across South Africa. They work directly with communities to create meaningful opportunities that respond to local needs while building skills, restoring dignity, and strengthening the social economy.

By moving beyond traditional job creation, the SEF has pioneered highly innovative, technology-driven models that equip marginalised communities, unemployed youth, and local non-profits with market-relevant digital competencies, connected devices, and civic technology.

This case study draws on evidence across three rounds of implementation, outlining how the SEF is transforming public employment into a springboard for the Fourth Industrial Revolution through civic data mapping, rural tech hubs, tech-enabled agriculture, and micro-enterprise innovation.



| The Challenge

South Africa's underserved communities face a persistent cycle of youth unemployment and systemic digital exclusion. Key barriers to participation in the modern digital economy include:



Infrastructure Scarcity

A significant digital divide exists, with many participants lacking access to connected devices, laptops, or Wi-Fi, particularly in rural and informal settlements where telecommunications infrastructure is weak.



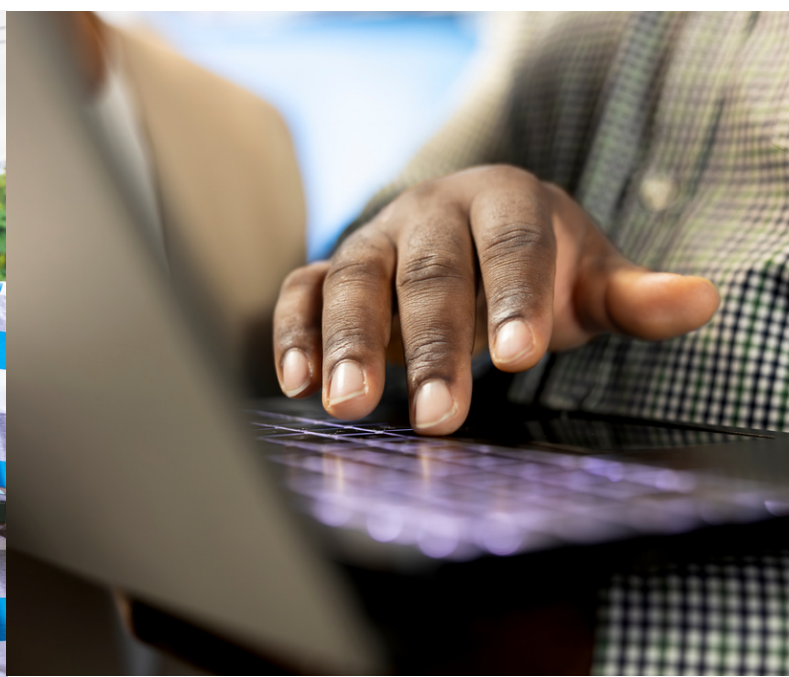
The Digital Literacy Gap

Unemployed youth often exit the schooling system without basic digital competencies, leaving them ill-equipped for modern workplaces or entrepreneurial ventures.



Administrative Friction

Grassroots Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) suffer from "reporting fatigue" and lack the technological capacity to manage large-scale data collection or formalise their operations.



Innovative Digital Models Pioneered by SIPs

Agri- and- Medical-Tech

- **Precision Agriculture:** Solidaridad Trust introduced an operational soil testing laboratory in Gauteng and trained rural smallholder farmers to use the AgroCares Soil Scanner alongside the Open Data Kit (ODK) in Rounds 1 to 3. This allowed for real-time, in-field soil analysis to inform fertiliser application and crop selection, vastly modernising subsistence farming.
- **Digital Health Screenings:** Small Projects Foundation utilises SEF participants to conduct mass screenings, successfully executing EyeCare screenings and referrals for 11,230 learners since Round 3.

Digitising the Creative Economy

- The Music In Africa Foundation integrates digital inclusion into the arts by training creatives in podcasting, digital marketing, and Intellectual Property management, whilst actively digitising cultural catalogues and producing community-based digital media.

Civic Tech for Service Delivery and Safety

- **V-NET Community Wi-Fi & CheckIT:** In Rounds 1 to 3, Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) successfully installed and maintained 260 functional public VNET Wi-Fi hotspots in informal settlements. Their data collectors used the CheckIT app to digitally log broken public infrastructure (like taps and toilets) directly to the City of Cape Town, submitting 20,974 records and pushing the functional status of public taps in all areas above 75%.
- **Digital Incident Escalation:** In Round 4, Memeza employed Community Safety Ambassadors equipped with the Memeza Intelligence Gathering Mobile App to digitally log and escalate real-time crime and gender-based violence incidents directly to the South African Police Service and Community Policing Forums.
- **Digital Addressing:** Planact utilised the Kobo Collect application to digitally map informal settlements in Rounds 1 to 4. They successfully assigned unique digital addresses to 1,453 households, enabling better municipality targeting for basic services.



E-Learning Hubs

- **Autonomous Learning Management Systems:** Across all SEF rounds, Brownie Points set up a custom Learning Management System on Alison.com, allowing participants to access over 5,500 CPD-accredited courses autonomously via their mobile phones. To combat language barriers, they are exploring translating course content into native African languages.
- **Rural Digital Enablers:** Edunova specifically recruits youth as "Intern Technology Enablers" to provide IT support, cloud tool facilitation, and AI training directly to schools and local enterprises. Similarly, Africa!Ignite [MP3] established WOWBIZ centres in Round X where youth use an "each-one-teach-one" model to help local community businesses set up Google Business Profiles, social media pages, and digital maps for tourism.



Digital inclusion is not a separate outcome of social employment. It is the enabler that multiplies every other pathway to opportunity.

| Success at Scale

- **Mass-Scale Digital Literacy and Education Reach:** The scale of SEF's digital rollout in schools is unprecedented. In Round 3 alone, The Learning Trust's (TLT) coalition reached 92,582 learners with digital inclusion support (surpassing their initial target of 10,000 by 926%). This was made possible by SEF participants helping to establish, maintain, and operationalise 190 computer labs in under-resourced learning environments. Meanwhile, VPUU's VNET Wi-Fi network provided free connectivity to an astonishing 419,129 unique users.
- **Systemic Upgrades for Grassroots NPOs:** One of the greatest lasting legacies of the SEF is the forced "digital leap" it created for the non-profit sector. By mandating the use of digital tools like the Kwantu biometric application and Kobo Collect, SEF pushed hundreds of grassroots CBOs to adopt digital administration. Brownie Points took this further by developing automated digital workflows and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tracking features that they shared with other SIPs (including TLT and Johannesburg Inner City Partnership), which TLT noted cut their onboarding and administrative time by 25%.

- **Unlocking Sustainable Pathways:**

Digital upskilling directly translated into verifiable pathways. Through the ATS Mzansi Digital Learning Platform and Brownie Points' Alison.com initiative, hundreds of participants across Rounds 3 earned formal certificates in Financial Literacy, Business Administration, and Basic Digital Skills. Avo Vision reported a 17% increase in the use of online banking among ECDs and a 22% increase among green businesses due to digital interventions.

Human Impact

The profound success of the SEF's digital drive is reflected in its participants:

Beginning her SEF journey as a data capturer, **Nthabiseng (Avo Vision)** utilised her exposure to digital monitoring systems to continuously upskill. She progressed to an M&E assistant, then to an ECD analyst, and ultimately developed the organisation's Theory of Change before securing permanent formal employment.

Unable to afford further studies after matriculating, **Francina Muhlenga (Seriti)**, used the Mzansi Digital platform provided through SEF to complete a Marketing Certification, which directly led to an offer for in-service training and employment.

Lebogang Mametsa (Avo Vision), is a 22-year-old assistant teacher in Zandspruit who applied the business and digital skills gained in training to identify a market gap in her rural community. She launched her own retail business selling umbrellas and raincoats, seamlessly combining her educational role with a newly formed micro-enterprise.



| Key Learnings from SEF Programmes



Device and Data are Essential Infrastructure: Inclusion can be achieved through training alone, it requires physical enablement. Expecting participants to use exclusionary barrier. Providing laptops, tablets, data stipends, and public Wi-Fi hotspots is critical to programme success.



Design for "Offline-First" Realities: Given South Africa's connectivity challenges and load shedding, digital tools must feature offline capabilities. Apps like Kobo Collect, which allow data to be gathered offline and synced later when connectivity is restored, proved essential for uninterrupted rural and informal settlement operations.



Digital Skills Multiply All Other Interventions: Digital inclusion should not be siloed. Providing digital skills to a farmer (AgroCares scanner), a health worker (capturing patient data), or an ECD practitioner (managing attendance apps) fundamentally multiplies the effectiveness and efficiency of all other thematic interventions.



Micro-Accreditations Drive Confidence: Offering short, Continuing Professional Development accredited courses via mobile-friendly platforms (like Alison or Mzansi Digital) provides immediate, tangible rewards that boost participant confidence and CV credibility.

The Social Employment Fund demonstrates that digital inclusion is not a luxury reserved for the formal economy; it is a fundamental driver of grassroots resilience. From institutionalising tech-enabled models, to digital GBV escalation, soil scanning and automated NPO administration. The programme has established a highly scalable, digitally integrated blueprint for ensuring that South Africa's most vulnerable communities not only survive, but actively participate and innovate within the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

This case study is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected by Strategic Implementing Partners across three rounds of the Social Employment Fund.



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