Case Study: Zenzeleni Community Networks

Type of Organisation
Non Profit Company + Community Cooperatives

Founders
Dr Carlos Rey-Moreno and Masibulele Jay Siya

Employees/Beneficiaries
Approximately 10 volunteers in the NPC and 8–10 members in each cooperative

Aim of the organisation
Zenzeleni Community Networks is a community-owned internet service provider (ISP) which aims to bridge the digital divide by providing high-speed, cheap, wireless internet to rural communities. Communities choose cooperative members who own, operate and maintain their networks and sell internet services and data bundles. These cooperatives are supported by the non profit company. The proceeds are reinvested in the network and community projects to encourage meaningful engagement with the internet.

Location
Zithulele and Mankozi, Eastern Cape

Website/contact details
www.zenzeleni.net; info@zenzeleni.net

▶ Bridging the digital divide, one rural community at a time

To the untrained eye the colourfully painted rural villages that dot the green hills of Mankosi and Zithulele in the OR Tambo District of the Eastern Cape appear far removed from the technologically driven realities of urban society. Indeed, this part of South Africa remains highly underdeveloped and is characterized by high unemployment and poverty. But take a step closer and you will notice *gogos* (grannies) video-calling their relatives in the city, teenagers sharing dance moves on social media and children accessing educational material via their cell phones.

What sets Mankosi and Zithulele apart from similar communities in this district is their access to affordable, reliable internet supplied by Zenzeleni Community Networks. Zenzeleni Community Networks is a non-profit, locally-owned internet service provider that creates strategic partnerships in local communities with the aim of bridging the digital divide by providing internet via solar, battery or electrically powered Wi-Fi hotspots.
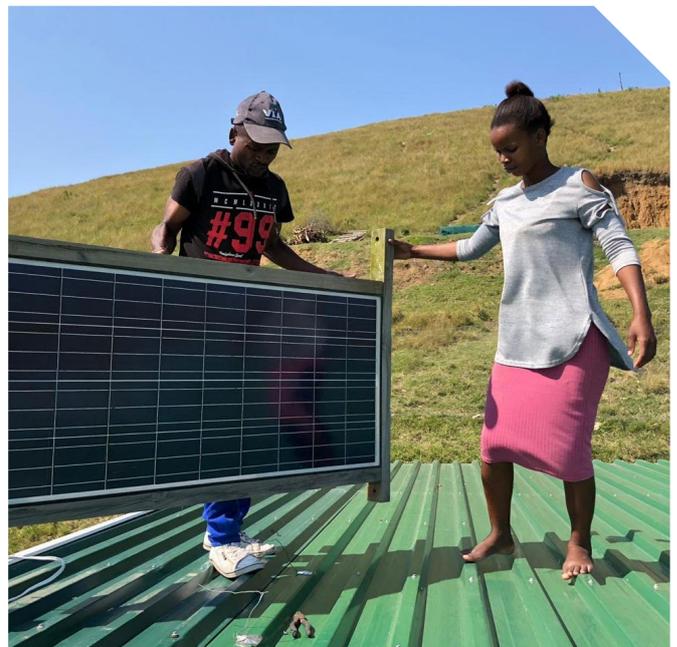
The location of the hotspot in each community is identified, owned and managed through a local Zenzeleni Cooperative and a dedicated and trusted hotspot host is identified. Community members pay the host R25 (less than $2) a month for unlimited internet access and the proceeds are ploughed back into maintaining the network and creating initiatives, such as solar powered computer labs to provide computer access, as well as training and support for community members to use the network in a meaningful way.

Bridging the digital divide

Rural and under-resourced communities are on the wrong side of the digital divide, resulting in a lack of access to the diversity and range of online information, entertainment, school support materials and e-commerce. More importantly, this divide excludes people (particularly young people) from developing digital skills, which are imperative in a modern economy for inclusion in a broad range of business or employment opportunities.

◄◄ "We work towards bridging the digital divide", says Sol Luca de Tena, Zenzeleni Networks NPC's, Acting CEO.

"Zenzeleni currently provides affordable, reliable connectivity … but it also develops projects to address other challenges. We have deployed a solar powered computer lab, and developed other projects to enable people to access devices … and skills to apply digital resources to their everyday life. We go beyond what an ISP typically offers and make sure that we support users by making sure they can draw value from the internet."

Additional reading and information

Challenging Inequality in Post-apartheid South Africa: A Bottom-up, Community-led Business Model for Connectivity

How a Rural Community Built South Africa's First ISP Owned and Run by a Cooperative

First Community Owned ISP in Eastern Cape

Zenzeleni Community Wi-Fi Network Solution

Images supplied by: Zenzeleni Community Networks