SOWETO GOES ONLINE

Several suburbs of Soweto now have free WiFi thanks to an entrepreneur who believes access to the internet will solve many social problems.

BY ATANDA SITOLE 
PICTURES BY SHARON SERETLO

MAIN PICTURE: 
The technical team behind Soweto Wireless User Group (SWUG), the group responsible for free WiFi in Soweto. INSET: Jabulani Vilakazi, the founder, and Thato Mkhize, the treasurer.

SOWETO WIRELESS USER GROUP (SWUG) 

SOWEGO Wireless User Group (SWUG) and asked for help from his peers, who had vast experience in areas such as IT, project management, marketing, and public relations.

His friend, Phila Radebe (also 28), is also making full use of it. "I graduated from school a long time ago and have been struggling to find a job," Phila says. "Now I can e-mail my CV and look for a job online. I also use the educational content online to help my siblings with their school projects."

THE INSPIRATION TO SUCCEED

Worldwide, WiFi is already available in Jabulani, Orlando, Diepkloof, Meadowlands, Central Jebuleni, White City and Danleys. It’s not only for social media, educational and business reasons. It’s already been linked to CCTV cameras in crime hotspots in an attempt to combat criminal activity.

"My friends and I started a band and have been using the free WiFi to upload our music online," says Khotani Ndumiso (28) from Orlando. "I’m on the internet for up to six hours a day using social media, reading educational content and researching information."

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THE INSPIRATION TO SUCCEED

While I was at MTN last year because I wanted to follow this dream," says Malemela, who studied electronic engineering at Johannesberg Technical College and internet communications at Midrand Graduate Institute. "I approached the MTN SA Foundation, which deals with social responsibility."

To date there are already 20 active WiFi hotspots in Soweto. "Although we have partnered with various companies, we would like to see the Government also getting involved because we want residents to have a platform through which they can communicate with them. This could lead to an improvement in service delivery," he says.

WHO'S FUNDING THE PROJECT?

SWUG has partnered with network provider Dark Fibre Africa: Open Access, data centre company Teraco Data Environments and internet provider Vox Telecom to launch the WiFi project. Teraco and Vox Telecom are involved in the project as part of their enterprise development programmes.

We have received over R100,000 from global organisation Internet Society, which is also assisting us with cybersecurity," says Thato. "Currently it’s costing us R250,000 a month to keep the network going and we will cost another R2 million to set up more infrastructure."

While there are initiatives to provide free WiFi access in areas such as the Free State and Western Cape, what’s unique about SWUG’s project is that there’s a network hub set up in Soweto — a crime hotspot. "Our CCTV cameras provide constant surveillance," Thato says.

"Without the internet, people struggle to apply for jobs."

"UPLIFTING THE COMMUNITY"

SWUG statistics show that in the 20 Wi-Fi hotspots set up across Soweto, nearly 700 people use their network — 93.42% via computers, 51.80% via cellphones and 25% via tablets.

The young people who spoke to the project were in full agreement that the service would also help them become more computer literate — something that’s vital for the country as a whole.

"Our project will give them access to a larger network and more content," says Jabulani, who is now a part of the team. "It’s important to have a basic human right.

www.sowug.org.za

"TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES THROUGH ICT DEVELOPMENT"

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"TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES THROUGH ICT DEVELOPMENT"

www.sowug.org.za
1. Who we are

- Non profit organisation
- Established in 2010
- When we started
- Team: Entrepreneurs, youth & activists
- Our community
Soweto Wireless eases digital gap

Noluthando Radebe

The digital divide is still very much in existence and with the apparent high data cost, it will still be an issue. The Soweto Wireless User Group is an organisation that aims to combat this problem.

Soweto Wireless User Group (SOWUG), is an NPO (Non-profit organisation) that was established in 2010 and its vision is to create an internet-connected wireless network in Gauteng townships to bridge the digital divide and bring down the cost of connectivity and communication so that users can address their social and economic challenges.

“We transform communities through ICT development. SOWUG intends to roll-out at least 100 hot-spots in Soweto thus partners are needed in order to realise this,” said Thato Mfikwe, CEO of SOWUG.

There are currently around 10 hotspots in Soweto; these are situated at Jabulani Flats, Diepkloof, Orlando West and Meadowlands. The high-site tower is situated at Orlando East. It connects more than 1000 people and there are also 10 local businesses and 10 households that are connected to the network.

Thato Mfikwe.

The network is targeted specifically for marginalised communities more especially for young people and entrepreneurs who use ICT’s for business purposes.

The organisation has been in existence for 7 years and has had some impressive achievements.

Mfikwe has been to the USA over 21 days on a professional exchange program with the aim of acquiring innovation, entrepreneurship and small business development skills which he can use in the organisation. The Chief Manager and the Project manager of SOWUG have also been to the same program.

“We have forged a very good relationship with the local US embassy to afford us opportunities to learn abroad and implement these learning locally. We are currently full of potential but only lacking support for our ideas”, said Mfikwe. “We are now starting to become an international organisation.”

“Early in 2015 we secured offices that enabled us to start implementing grassroot programs and training. As from 2014 we worked with Foundation for Internet Development for backhaul support (Data center and bandwidth provision) and now one of the small businesses we are working with has given us a 1Gbps bandwidth link for the next 18 months.”

If you want to make hotspots available for your business, community or household, send Thato Mfikwe an e-mail at thato@sowug.org.za
2. What we do

✓ Transform communities through ICT Development

✓ Wireless Network for social & economic development

✓ Bridge the digital divide

✓ Make information more accessible & communication more affordable

✓ An enabling environment for innovation & entrepreneurship
The Digital starts from
3. Why we do it

✓ To help address social and economic challenges that exist

✓ To provide innovative solutions that have impact on communities and small businesses

✓ To enable people to take advantage of the IOT & the ICT’s

✓ To ensure that we have smart and forward thinking communities

✓ To ease the process of information access and enable rapid innovation
4. How we do it

✓ Build partnerships for backhaul & infrastructure
✓ Connect public hotspots, smme’s & households
✓ Work with volunteers, youth & entrepreneurs
✓ Transfer skills to youth, entrepreneurs & graduates
✓ Leverage on media platforms
5. Community Impact

- Internet related services
- Reducing unemployment
- Platforms for business development & support
- Bringing down the cost of communication
- Improved standards of living, economic and human development
**2014-2016**

1 high-site tower connected to fibre

- 1000 unique devices
- 150 simultaneous daily connections

10 households
10 businesses
2 Sub-station

**2017**

3 additional substations
10 additional connections
6. Latest developments

- Establishment of 3 more substations
- Acquisition of IP addresses and allocation of an ASN
- NAP Africa peering
- Renewal of Teraco agreement
- Work online bandwidth (50 mbps)
- Increased data usage
Thank you, Contact details

Website: [www.sowug.org.za](http://www.sowug.org.za) (has technical problems)

Twitter: @sowug

Facebook: Soweto Wireless User Group or SOWUG