SOWUG

SOWETO WIRELESS USER GROUP

"TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES THROUGH ICT DEVELOPMENT"

WWW.SOWUG.ORG.ZA

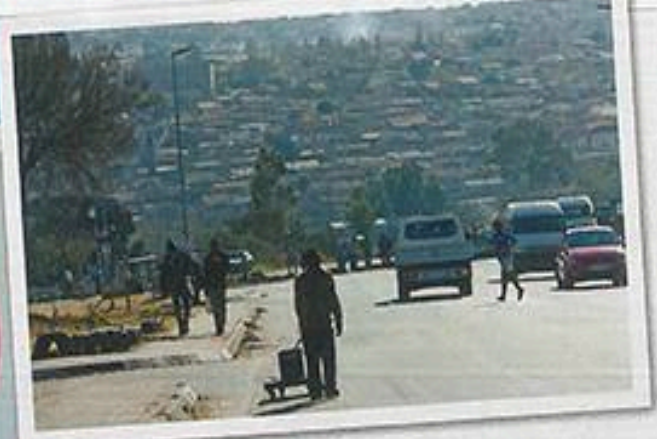
SOWETO GOES ONLINE

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

BY AYANDA SITOLE PICTURES BY SHARON SERETLO

MAIN PICTURE: The technical team behind Soweto Wireless User Group, the group responsible for free Wi-Fi in Soweto. INSET: Jabulani Vilakazi, the founder, and Thato Mfikwe, the treasurer.

BELOW: The free Wi-Fi access has enabled the youth to find jobs online. RIGHT: Twenty Wi-Fi hotspots around Soweto are already active.



TWO YOUNG men are hanging out in the sun in a Soweto garden, doing something that would have been unthinkable a year ago: using their laptops to access the internet via Wi-Fi (a system that allows users to access the internet wirelessly) to study and apply for jobs – and it's all free.

Thanks to Jabulani Vilakazi (34), an Orlando resident and former cellphone company employee whose vision is to extend free Wi-Fi throughout Soweto, they're able to use this service.

Wi-Fi is already available in Jabulani, Orlando, Diepkloof, Meadowlands, Central Jabavu, White City and Dlamini.

And 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 Wi-Fi to upload our music online," says Xolani Ndamase (28) from Orlando. "I'm on the internet for up to six hours a day using social media, reading educational content and researching information."

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

"While I was at MTN I realised people were struggling to access the internet and were limited to using data from their cellphones," says Jabulani. "That's why I decided that as someone who comes from Soweto, I could provide a free Wi-Fi service to the people who live here."

So, in 2010 Jabulani established a non-governmental organisation called Soweto Wireless User Group (SOWUG) and asked for help from his peers, who had vast experience in areas such as IT, project management, marketing and public relations.

"I quit my job at MTN last year because I wanted to follow this dream," says the man who studied electronic engineering at Johannesburg 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 Wi-Fi 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.

His view on free internet access is shared by the United Nations, which declared it a human right in 2011, saying it was "an indispensable tool for realising a range of human rights, combating inequality and accelerating development and human progress".

THE BENEFITS OF FREE ACCESS

Residents need only set up a profile and create login details and they then have 500 megabytes of data a month to use.

This will give them access to services such as e-commerce, a platform for small businesses and entrepreneurs; e-learning, which gives students access to past exam papers, free online courses and literature; and e-transport, which provides residents with up-to-date news when there are strikes or delays.

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

Thato Mfikwe (36), SOWUG's treasurer, is also passionate about the project and believes it's long overdue.

"Lack of access to the internet prohibits people's social and economic development," he says. "Without the internet, people struggle to apply for jobs and send e-mails and are limited to buying data, which can be expensive."

WHO'S FUNDING THE PROJECT?

SOWUG has partnered with network provider Dark Fibre Africa: Open Access, data centre company Teraco Data Environments and internet provider Vox Telecom to launch the Wi-Fi 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 R25 000 a month to keep the network going and will cost another R2 million to set up more infrastructure."

While there are several initiatives to put free Wi-Fi in areas such as the Free State and Western Cape, what's unique about SOWUG's project is that their network has been set up in Soweto – a crime hotspot. "Our CCTV cameras provide constant surveillance," Thato says.

UPLIFTING THE COMMUNITY

SOWUG 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 we spoke to in the township 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 of his brainchild, which should go a long way towards providing the internet access the United Nations calls "a basic human right". ■

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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."

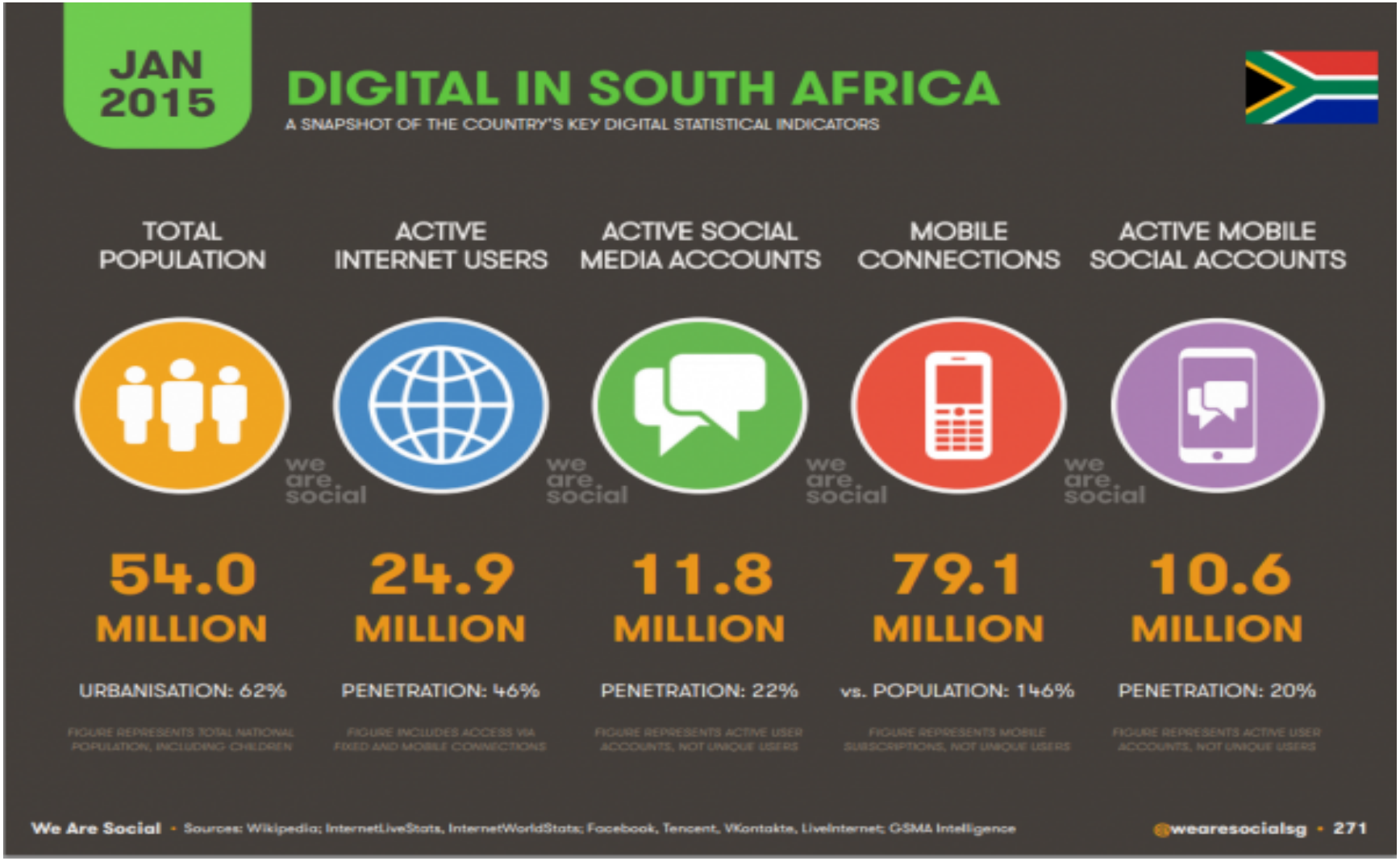
"Early in 2015 we secured offices that enabled us to start implementing grassroot programs and training. As from 2014 we worked with Foundation for Internet Development for backhaul support (Data center and bandwidth provision) and now one of the small businesses we are working with has given us a 1Gbps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

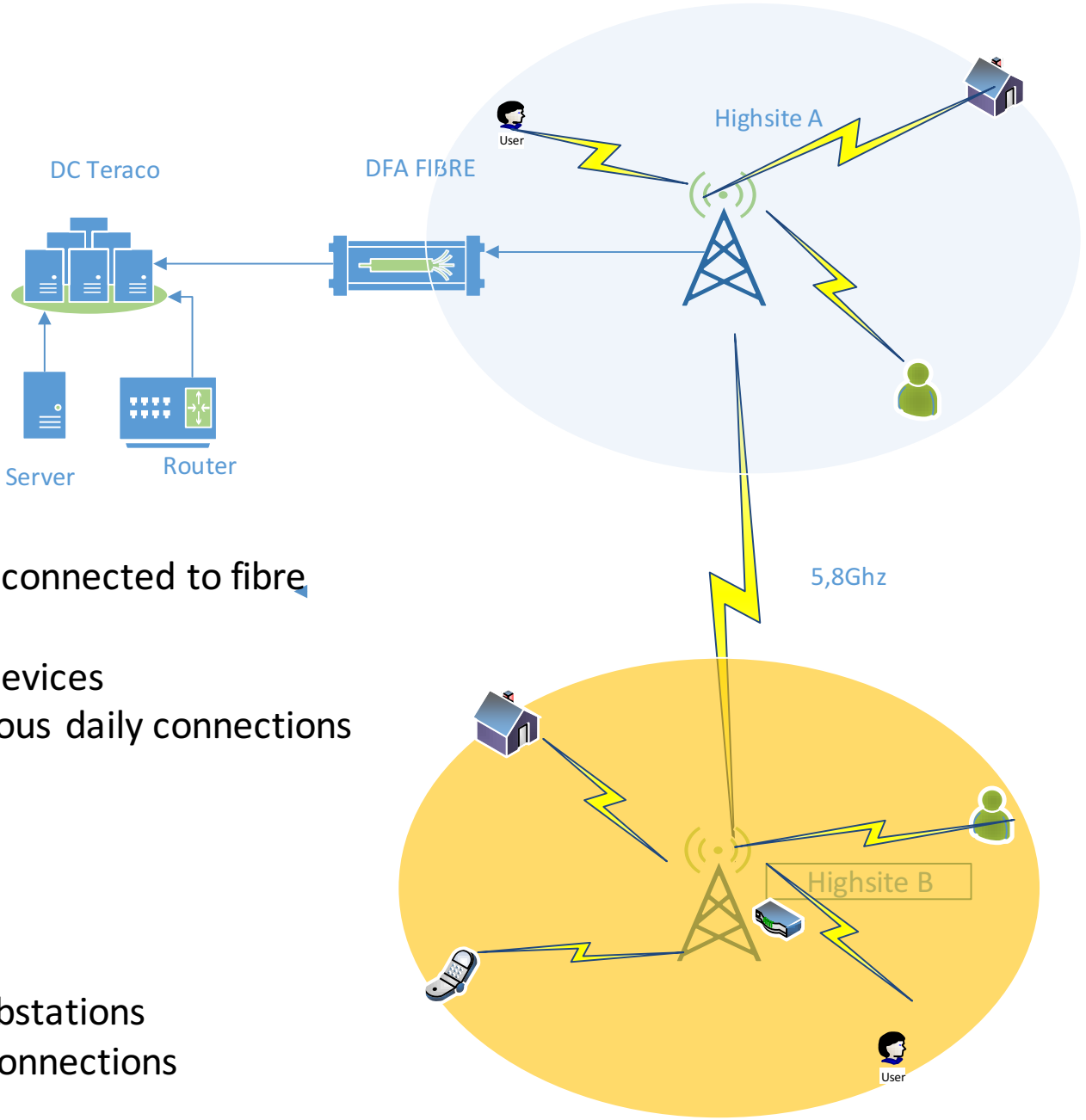
4. How we do it

- ✓ 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

SOWUG NETWORK SCHEMATIC DIAGRAM



2014-2016

1 high-site tower connected to fibre
10 hotspots
- 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 (has technical problems)

Twitter: @sowug

Facebook: Soweto Wireless User Group or SOWUG