

**ALEXANDRA TOWNSHIP AND THE ALEXSAN
KOPANO RESOURCE CENTRE**

BACKGROUND REPORT

**FOR UNESCO
DEVELOPING OPEN LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR GENDER
EQUITY WITH THE SUPPORT OF ICTS**

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Terms of Reference

This report is the first part of a larger community needs assessment for the *Developing Open Learning Communities for Gender Equity with the Support of ICTs* project. The project will focus especially on youth and women. The overall objectives of this project are to:

- Assess learning needs and the impact of ICTs for community development and lifelong learning in selected African communities;
- Develop gender sensitive and locally produced ICT applications packages for community development and lifelong learning;
- Share knowledge and experiences about the application development process, which contributes to the creation of open learning communities.

South Africa has been chosen as a pilot country for the project with the focus being on the Alexsan Kopano Resource Centre. The LINK Centre, represented by Merridy Wilson, was contracted to undertake research for Activity 1 of the project by Holly Luton-Nel of the Alexsan Kopano Educational Trust on behalf of UNESCO. Activity 1, of which this report is one part, should provide information on the project environment, baseline data, and an assessment of the information and learning needs of the youth of the community.

The terms of reference for this specific report are as follows:

Compile a general report of the community of Alexandra Township and the Alexsan Kopano Resources Centre.

The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of Holly Luton-Nel in providing information about the Centre and also note that all photographs used in this report are taken from the Alexsan Kopano Website (www.alexsankopano.org.za). Thank you too to the staff of the Alexsan Centre for giving of their time to answer my questions.

Introduction

As noted in the TOR above, this report is a small part of a larger UNESCO project – *Developing open learning communities for gender equity with the support of ICTs*. It is important at the outset to briefly introduce and define some of these concepts in order to relate them to the specific case study of the Alexsan Kopano Resource Centre in Alexandra Township, South Africa.

According to the UNESCO Concept Note (July 2002) for the project, open learning communities “refers to visions of education and development, which build on local knowledge systems, constructive interaction, the exchange of experiences and knowledge creation” (p.1). Development has been defined as “positive change” (p.2). This concept of development is further elaborated to specifically state that this does not imply the attainment of internationally defined notions of economic progress, but rather is a reflection of the aspirations of the particular group of people concerned. As such, “open learning communities are concerned about connecting people, their cultures, lives, languages and environments through relevant learning, which is seen as a dynamic lifelong process for positive change” (p.2).

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have an important role to play in the development of open learning communities and lifelong learning. Due to the power of ICTs these communities can be within a geographic community, but they need not be as communication has become independent of locality due to ICT developments. ICTs are tools which when used in an appropriate and relevant manner allow for the sharing of local cultures and knowledge and so can play a role in efforts to build bridges between local, national, regional and even global contexts. One example of these bridges in an educational context is that of the ThinkQuest initiative (see www.thinkquest.org). ThinkQuest is a global online learning community of learners, teachers, parents and technologists. Through ThinkQuest, young people work together in teams, use the Internet to research a topic in a variety of different subject areas and then publish their research as an educational web site for peers and classrooms around the world. Another example is that of the International Education and Resources Network (iEARN), which facilitates online collaborative projects for young people throughout the world. This project encourages lifelong learning and also assists students to address issues that are relevant to the world today (see www.learns.org).

The notion of relevant learning in the quotation cited earlier is of particular importance for the broad focus of this project, taking urban and rural differences into account, as well as for Activity 1 of the project, which seeks to assess the information and learning needs of the people in Alexandra, with a particular focus on youth and women¹.

Why a gender focus? There is a vast literature detailing the problems of gender equity in projects themselves as well as in society more generally (for example March, Smyth & Mukhopadhyay, 1999; Guijt & Shah, 1999). Gender issues are also particularly important when working in the realm of ICTs as has been shown by Hafkin & Taggart (2001). This project sets out to explicitly address this issue from the outset. In the context of an open learning approach the UNESCO Concept Note states that “Open learning communities intend to provide new spaces for women, men, adolescent girls and boys to engage in meaningful learning activities and knowledge sharing to break the silence around unfair gender relations and promote gender equity through any issues which are relevant to the day-to-day lives of the people concerned” (p.4). Thus for this specific case study of Alexsan Kopano Resource Centre, we need to develop a clear understanding of what meaningful learning activities would be as well as the types of information and knowledge available for sharing as well as what is needed. This needs to be done based firmly on the assumption that these needs will differ across gender and age groups. In the discussion of Alexandra Township below the importance of approaching the township as a complex social system rather than a homogenous group of people is highlighted.

Why a youth focus? In the South African context youth development is particularly important as many of our youth have had disrupted childhoods and adolescence defined by violence and resistance to the apartheid state, and since the change of government have still had to deal with growing up in vastly under-resourced and often violent environments with poor educational provision (Everatt, 2000; Foley, 2000). Furthermore, the youth are our future leaders and as such need us to invest in them now in order that they may be equipped to play their role in society in years to come. In South Africa, the official definition of youth is anyone from the age of 14 to 35 years. This wide definition does however at times complicate the area as needs

¹ It is not possible in the scope of this report to go into great detail about gender and youth issues, however, the importance of both is briefly noted and these themes are referred to throughout the report at varying times.

vary widely over the ages 14 to 35. In this particular project the objective is to focus on the target users of the Alexsan Kopano Centre, making sure to include women and the youth, or perhaps the term 'young people' is better, rather than defining very specific age range within which one must fall to be included as youth. The Youth Desk at the Alexsan Kopano Centre deals mostly with people between the ages of 20 and 28. According to the Youth 2000 study, we can expect employment issues to dominate for many of the young people, as well as crime and violence and the issue of HIV/AIDS (Braehmer, Kimmie, Greenstein, Morake & Seutloadi, 2000). It should be noted that the needs of adolescents are also considered important in the context of this study and will be assessed during the needs assessment phase. The following quotation neatly sums up the importance of youth development in South Africa, as well as the need to ground such projects in careful assessments of the needs and circumstances of the youth themselves. "The need for youth development is clear – unemployment is high and growing, HIV infection is extremely high, educational opportunities have been missed by many, and rape and violence are widespread. But those programmes have to be based on a sound understanding of youth cultures as they are – not as we want them to be or as we think they ought to be" (Everatt, 2000: 37).

In light of the above discussions and concepts, and the objectives of this aspect of the project (Activity 1), this particular report is based on a review of the relevant literature dealing with the Alexandra township (commonly known as Alex) as well as a series of documents and reports about the Alexsan Kopano Resource Centre provided by Holly Luton-Nel of the Alexsan Kopano Educational Trust. In addition, two site visits to the centre were done and telephone interviews were conducted with several of the centre staff to gain their perspective on the centre and its role in Alexandra. A system of recording Internet café users was also put in place and early data available included in this report.

Alexandra Township

"Alex has seen it all. It has been home to all people at all times, and even today when everything else doesn't work, people head for the township that is also simply known as Township" (Makgalemele, 2001).

This section aims to provide an overview of Alexandra Township, with a brief discussion of the history and then a description of the township today. Due to the nature of the report this cannot be a full and comprehensive history, rather the aim is to set the township today against a historical background in order to provide a deeper understanding of the present conditions.

The Alexandra township is located in the North Eastern suburbs of Johannesburg. Alex, which carries many of the deep scars of Apartheid, lies next to some of the most wealthy areas of Johannesburg, making the severe poverty and deprivation in the township a stark contrast to the wealth of Sandton just 3km away. As far as townships go in South Africa, Alex is somewhat of an anomaly. While many townships are huge and located far from urban centres, Alex is just over 800 hectares, or 1 square mile, or 7.6 square kilometres and is very well located being close to the centre of Johannesburg and near to main travelling routes. In this 1 square mile area we find approximately 350 000 people. 70% of this population is estimated to be under 35 years of age (the official South African higher limit for the category 'youth').



Looking out over Alexandra



A view of Alex's streets, showing a Vodacom phone shop on the Left

History of Alexandra²

“Life in Alexandra was exhilarating and precarious. Its atmosphere was alive, its spirit adventurous, its people resourceful. Although the township did boast some handsome buildings, it could fairly be described as a slum, living testimony to the neglect of the authorities. The roads were unpaved and dirty, and filled with hungry, undernourished children scampering around half-naked. The air was thick with the smoke of coal fires in tin braziers and stoves. A single water tap served several houses. Pools of stinking, stagnant water full of maggots collected by the side of the road. Alexandra was known as the ‘Dark City’ for its complete absence of electricity. Walking home at night was perilous, for there were no lights, the silence pierced by yells, laughter and occasional gunfire” (Nelson Mandela, 1994, p.88 – describing Alex in the 1940s).

Alexandra was proclaimed a ‘Native Township’ in 1912. Alex was originally part of a farm owned by a Mr Papenfus. He tried to start a white suburb, named Alexandra after his wife, on the land in 1904 but since at this time the area was considered too far out of the centre of Johannesburg there was little demand for the land. As such, it became an area where black people could buy and own land under freehold title. This was the year before the 1913 Native Land Act was passed which prevented black people from owning land in the urban areas of South Africa. Thus, Alex provided a unique opportunity for black people to live within a city in a status other than temporary sojourner. After 1913 no further freehold land could be proclaimed for black people and as more and more people migrated to Johannesburg in search of work so the overcrowding of designated black areas began. Until 1958 Alex was administered by a Health Committee, which because of lack of funds and other problems, was largely ineffective. Because Alex was a designated black area the Johannesburg City Council refused to be involved in Alex. As a result, the township suffered years of neglect and lack of investment and living conditions became progressively worse.

² This section draws on Morris (2000), Zack (2001), the Alexandra Renewal Project website and the Alexsan Kopano Brochure and website.

Alex residents have been subjected to several resettlement efforts. Between 1958 and 1973 approximately 56 000 people were forcibly moved to Soweto (particularly Meadow Lands and Diepkloof), and about 15 000 to Tembisa in the northeast Rand. As Morris (2000) notes, such removals went directly against the urban renewal lessons learned in other countries. Not all residents had to be moved. Those who could prove that they had work in central Johannesburg were able to stay as Alex provided an important labour pool for Johannesburg. During the 1960s and 1970s Alexandra was subject to a series of urban planning efforts, each as problematic as the other. One of these was a plan to rebuild the township as a hostel city, with 25 hostels each housing 2500 people. Another plan involved the building of blocks of flats also in an attempt to deal with housing problems³.

Throughout this time the overcrowding of Alexandra continued, as the township became a refuge to many seeking work, often illegally, in Johannesburg. In 1986 the influx control legislation (which prevented black people from entering urban areas unless for work) was abolished and people were able to move more freely. This increased the numbers of people coming into Alex. From July 1987 to October 1991 the number of shacks increased from 7352 to 20 000. Morris (2000) notes that people were so desperate for land and living space that shacks were sometimes erected overnight on roads being prepared for paving. The number of shacks is now estimated to be around 34 000 (www.alexandra.co.za).

In addition to the issues described above, Alex has been through decades of political upheaval (see for a descriptive example, Jochelson, 1990). During the years of apartheid, Alex was often the site of anti-apartheid political struggle and especially the youth movements against apartheid. In 1943 Nelson Mandela who at the time lived in Alexandra took part in the Alexandra Bus Boycott, a peaceful protest which had a great effect on Mandela due to the effectiveness of the action (Mandela, 1994). Not all political protest was peaceful, especially from the mid-1960s to 1980s, and in addition to the violence of apartheid and opposition to the system, residents also lived through hostel violence and political violence after 1994. As such, the people of Alexandra have known a history of poverty, poor living conditions and violence. It is against this backdrop that we must understand the Alex of today.

³ Please see Morris (2000) and Zack (2001) for details on the various urban renewal plans, their outcomes and why they were flawed from the outset.

Alexandra today

It is important to note that Alex should not be seen as a homogenous township area. Instead, it is diverse and disparate. There are people of different cultures, who speak different languages, have varying levels of income and education. Isserow and Everatt (1998) found Zulu to be the main language spoken (30%) followed by North Sotho/Pedi (26%), Tswana (12%), Xhosa (10%) with Shangaan/Tsonga, South Sotho and Venda making up the rest. The ratio of men to women is estimated to be 1:1.22. 60% of men and 61% of women were estimated by the Isserow and Everatt (1998) study to be between the ages of 18 and 34.

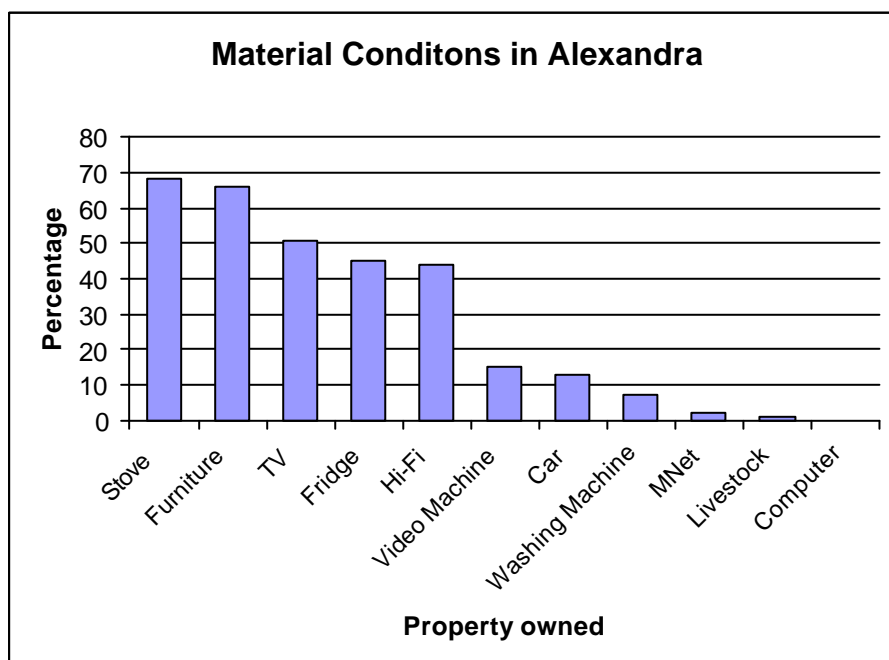
Further, the township itself is made up of 3 different parts. Old Alexandra lies to the West of the Jukskei river. This area is mostly a grid layout with large numbers of informal dwellings, 3 hostels, and blocks of flats. To the east of the Jukskei river is the East Bank which was developed in the 1980s and consists mostly of conventional middle class homes. The Far East Bank has RDP houses, the recent All Africa Games – Tutsamani Village housing as well as other housing developments. Alex is considered an established township with 54% of residents having lived there for at least 10 years. There is a continuous flow of people into and out of Alex, but even so it seems that most residents have lived there since before 1994 (Isserow and Everatt, 1998).

Socio-economic conditions

As described above, Alex has a long history of poverty and overcrowding. In this section some basic socio-economic information about the current status of the people of Alex will be provided. The unemployment rate (using a conservative definition which includes only those actively looking for work) for Alex is 32%, which is higher than that for Africans in Gauteng more generally (29%). However, anecdotal reports estimate unemployment (including those who have stopped looking for work or undertake informal sector activities to bring in some money) to be much higher, in the region of 60%. The employment status of women is worse than for men. 40% of women are unemployed compared to 19% of men. For those who are employed, most work in low-skilled or semi-skilled jobs. CASE has estimated the average monthly income for Alex at R1029.00. Disposable income is usually spent on food, accounts, rent and clothing.

When compared to national averages, the people of Alex tend to have a higher level of education, very similar to the rest of Gauteng. However, very few people living in Alex have studied beyond secondary school levels. It is also important to note that within secondary schools, there is a high loss of learners from grade 9 to grade 12 (final high school level). For example, a high school in Alex at present has 321 grade 9 learners (7 classes) and only 72 grade 12 learners (3 classes). The reasons for this loss of learners at the higher levels is complex and a detailed explanation would require further research. Some learners are likely to simply drop out of school, some leave Alex for schooling elsewhere, but according to the deputy principal of a local high school, many learners leave in order to begin with vocational training at technical colleges as this is seen as more likely to qualify them for jobs. The issue of school versus further education and training (FET) sectors is particularly complex at present because of the current educational policy environment in South Africa. However, the need for vocational training is of relevance to this particular project and will be further explored in the focus groups to follow. Similarly, Isserow and Everatt (1998) found a strong need for technical colleges and Adult Basic Education Centres in Alex.

The following graph (adapted from Isserow and Everatt, 1998) provides a clear summary of the material conditions of people in Alexandra.



We see from the above graphical representation that 0% of people have a computer. In absolute numbers there were a few households that had a computer, these were

almost all in the wealthier East Bank region. Alexsan Kopano documentation notes that there is no Internet access in the township outside of the centre. There are various channels of communication within the Township, with 70% of people getting most of the information from ALX.FM community radio, 21% via pamphlets, 18% via newspapers, 17% from friends and family (i.e. word of mouth) 9% at community meetings (Isserow and Everatt, 1998). However, it should be noted that at the time of this survey ALX.FM was at its peak. Listeners have decreased since 1998 and anecdotal evidence suggests that word of mouth is becoming an increasingly important means of communication and information sharing. The study also found that communication channel use was gendered and dependent on the area within Alex.

Crime and violence is still a reality for many living in Alex. Isserow and Everatt (2000) found that 83% of people in Alex thought that crime had increased since 1994. The study showed that the most common form of crime was car hi-jacking (28%) followed by rape (27%), housebreaking (18%), murder (17%), and child abuse (6%). Male focus group participants in the study reported a fear of sending younger siblings to shops because of child abuse. Problems with police handling of crime were also commonly noted. Women expressed an even greater fear of crime since they are likely to suffer sexual as well as criminal violence.

Alexandra Renewal Project

“Townships were constructed to provide controlled environments in which to house the labour force. They were deliberately denied services and facilities. On the positive side, community life was in many cases very communal, and heavily politicised. Now, in the 1990s, townships have to become ‘normal’” (Isserow & Everatt, 1998: 97)

Due to the problems of overcrowding and of many years of a lack of service provision the infrastructure of Alex has been put under severe strain. This congestion has made living conditions stressful, unhealthy and dangerous. Water pressure is low and there are frequent sewage problems. Electricity connections are haphazard and in many cases dangerous as people tap off the main lines to their shacks. To complicate matters further, high density also makes reaching areas for maintenance, repairs and assistance impossible in some cases.

It is against this background that the Alexandra Renewal Project was launched by President Mbeki at the official opening of Parliament in February 2001. The project has a budget of R1.3 billion and will run for seven years, and is an effort to help Alex to become 'normal' as noted in the quotation above. The overall aim of the Alexandra Renewal Project is to upgrade living conditions and encourage human development in Alex. The project will focus on the following broad areas, each with specific areas of concern (please see www.alexandra.co.za for details of the project):

- *Economic Development* (developing small business enterprises, promoting investment in Alexandra, optimising land use and developing human skills)
- *Housing* (upgrading existing houses, development of new houses, transfer of publicly owned housing, backyard rental accommodation, redevelopment of hostels, redevelopment of warehouses, and relocation of informal dwellings)
- *Spatial Planning and the Environment* (overall plan for Alexandra, parks and recreation, upgrading cemeteries, water and air quality, and cleaning of the Jukskei river)
- *Engineering Services* (water, sanitation, waste management, electricity, roads and storm water, and taxi ranks)
- *Social Services* (schools, teacher learning centre, HIV/Aids, upgrading of Edenvale hospital, clinic facilities, mental health programme, welfare services, sports and recreation, heritage, and arts and culture)
- *Public Safety and Security* (police stations, fire and emergency, victim support, metro police, and public safety and partnership).

Further, the project has adopted a participatory approach where as much work as possible will be allocated to the people living in Alex.

Alexsan Kopano Resource Centre

History

The Alexsan Kopano Resource Centre has its roots in a need expressed by community leaders in 1986 to bring the people of Alexandra back together and to begin with community-led development of the township. Various research studies had shown the importance people accorded to housing (and still do), but the need for a multipurpose centre where the community could come together for meetings, information and a variety of different services including educational opportunities was also noted. At the time there was no centre in Alex where such activities could take

place. Working with concerned residents of nearby suburbs, community members linked hands and named the initiative Alexsan Kopano. The community has been involved in all aspects of the project beginning with the building of the centre itself. The community were included in all fundraising activities as well as the planning of the centre such as discussions with architects. As such there is still a very strong sense of community ownership of the centre and it is significant to note that this centre has not had any serious problems with theft since inception, which is unique, compared to many other such centres (particularly those with computers) in South Africa. In addition, the Centre has commissioned several research projects in order to better understand the needs of the Alex community (see documents listed below).

In 1990 the EED Germany provided funding for the centre and at this point the association became a trust, the Alexsan Kopano Educational Trust. The Trust is a non-government, non-profit organisation. The Centre was officially opened on the 19th February 1992. The role of the Trust is now three-fold including: Property Management (finance, administration and physical maintenance of the Centre); Facilitation (establishing and maintaining networks with key role players, access to resources, information provision, advice and local policy debates); and Project Management (identification, preparation, appraisal and implementation).

Description of the centre and its users

This section aims to provide descriptive information about the Alexsan Kopano Centre and its users in order to contextualise the site at which the UNESCO pilot project will be run. This provides background information to the needs assessment that will follow at a later date.

The Alexsan Centre is a good example of a Multi-Purpose Community Centre (MPCC). The centre is sizable with a large hall, office block, computer training centre, library, Internet café, tuckshop as well as 22 offices, 10 activity rooms and other rooms, which are rented out to community organisations. In addition the Centre has 5 public telephones. On visiting, one is immediately struck by the bustle of people, of all ages and both men and women making use of the Centre.



A view of the Alexsan Centre

The Centre itself has a staff consisting of 3 people for management and accounting, 2 centre management staff, 5 cleaning and maintenance staff, 6 security staff, 2 library staff, 4 computer trainers and 3 youth desk employees. In addition to this there is a significant volunteer base as well. 8 of these 25 staff members, including the centre director, are women.



The Alexsan Reception Area – where people can have photocopies done and send faxes etc.

The Centre offers a variety of different services. These are briefly summed up below (with more details provided about the computing services) in order to further contextualise the concept of an MPCC.

Alexsan Computer Studio

The computer studio consists of 24 computers in two different rooms. Three types of training are currently offered. There is an 8-week full time Workskills Training Programme consisting of Business Fundamentals and Computer Technology, Computer Technology evening and Saturday classes, and the 35hr InfoLit course which is accredited by the University of the Witwatersrand. All three courses introduce learners to typing skills, Microsoft Windows, Word and Excel. In June and December 2001 41 people (31 teachers and 10 from the police) took part in the InfoLit training, and during the year April 2001 to March 2002, 285 people took part in the other two training programmes. 207 of these were full time learners, 31 took part in the Saturday classes and 47 in the evening classes. 80% of the computer training participants are female. The computer courses cost R900 (US\$80), which includes course materials.



Participants in computer training



Participants in computer training

Staff involved in computer training were asked why they think it is important for people to learn computer skills. The importance of computer skills for finding jobs was always noted. One interviewee remarked that having basic computer skills nowadays is the same as having a driver's licence or a matric (final high school qualification) in terms of how essential they are for one to function in today's world. The role of computers and the Internet in providing people with information was also noted as very important.

Alexsan Community Library

The Alexsan Community Library includes an adult and a children's library. In addition, the library is involved in a series of outreach activities, including workshops dealing with various topics, school debates, Youth Day celebrations, a readathon and general support of learners in their studies. The library provides a quiet environment conducive for studying and as such is used by learners of all ages for this purpose. In November 2001 the Alexsan Community Library won first Special Prize at the Gauteng MEC Awards for Community Libraries.

In addition, the library has recently set up an Internet café with funds provided by Sasol (start up and running for one year) for this purpose. The Internet café has 6 Pentium II computers connected to the Internet via a shared telephone line. This means that Internet access costs do not increase as more than one person connects to the Internet. The Internet café is open from 10.30am to 11.30am and from 2.30pm to 5.30pm 5 days per week. There is no charge for the use of this service at present.

A Log Sheet, taking into account, age, gender, highest level of education, reason for using the Internet and how often the Internet café is used, has been designed to create a user profile of the Internet café users (See Appendix 1 for Log Sheet). It is too early to report on the findings of this user profile, but the continued collection of this information will be important in assessing the impact of this project. From discussions with centre staff members, the Internet café sees a minimum of about 15 users and a maximum of about 30 users per day (i.e. the 4 hours that the Internet café is open).

Youth Desk

There is also a Youth Desk, especially focussing on activities helping the youth of Alex to prepare themselves for the world of work. The Youth Desk works on the basis of participatory processes. The following services have been provided by the Youth Desk during the past year: job club, women's networking and café, hospitality training, heritage agency and Gauteng Tourism Authority, events management training, life skills training, business skills training, train and earn projects, sports and recreation, Integrated Youth Work Programme with Technikon SA, corporate presentations, children's year end functions and job placement services.

Tenants

The Centre, apart from its own activities described above also has the following tenants, all of which provide a community service:

- Alex Tourism Association – Business entrepreneurship related to tourism and crafts, about 20 people visit this office each day.
- Flex and Hospitality Professionals – Training and placement in the hospitality industry, about 15 people visit this office each day.
- Kelly Temp – screening and placement of job seekers, computer training over 2 intensive weeks, about 30 people visit this office each day.
- Alex Clinic and Satellite Clinic – primary health care facility, sees about 560 people each week.
- Alex Chamber of Commerce – about 20 people visit each day and a general consultative monthly meeting is held and attended by about 200 people.
- Ashanti Investments – provides information about housing, rent/rates issues, crime can also be reported here, has between 12 and 20 visitors each day.

- African National Congress – political party office, between 20 and 100 people visit each day to get information about the party, depending on upcoming events and issues.
- Democratic Alliance – political party office, about 65 people visit the office monthly for information about the party and politics more generally.
- Life Line – counselling service, provide face-to-face and telephone counselling as well as life skills related session for adults and the youth, and peer support groups for young people.
- City Power Electricity – sells electricity units to people of Alex.
- ALX.FM – community radio station providing 24 hour broadcasting, about 15 to 20 people visit the offices each day to make announcements, view the radio station, look for jobs and conduct interviews. It has been found that 66% of men and 73% of women in Alex rely on ALX.FM for their information (Mollentz et al, 2000).



Broadcasting from ALX.FM

In addition to these tenants, the Centre also hires out rooms and the hall to various community groups and organisations, including church groups, choir groups and youth groups.

Successes and failures

The Alexsan Centre has been very successful when compared to other MPCCs and Telecentres in South Africa. One of the reasons for this is likely to be the very strong

sense of community ownership of the centre. As noted above, the community has been involved in all aspects of the centre, its conceptualisation, building phase and current activities. Alexsan has never had any serious theft problems, a difficulty which is common in many other such projects.

Almost all of the Alexsan staff members interviewed noted that Alexsan was so important to the community of Alex because of the range of services that it provides, the range of information that people can find there and the fact that the centre is so central within the township. In addition, the fact that Alexsan is the only MPCC in Alex was commonly cited as important. The centrality of the centre within Alex is also noted as important by staff members. A focus group participant in a study conducted by Toyota for the Alexsan Centre in 1997 stated that, “[the centre] is also attractive and is therefore a pride to the people of Alexandra”. Other success factors were attributed to good management. One staff member noted that, “if management was disorganised it would fall down. I would give a very high grade to management here”.

Many of the staff mentioned the value they attributed to the training that they had received since joining Alexsan. “I just want to thank the Centre, they have and still are providing me with so many skills”. This is likely to be another very important success factor. Many of the staff have worked at the centre for several years and believe in what the centre is trying to achieve. This does not mean that there are no difficulties experienced or political and financial struggles amongst staff at times. However, in general, the Centre staff are well trained, have a good understanding of their roles, enjoying serving the community and want to see the centre succeed.

The training courses provided for community members, computer and others, are very important because they provide training to the community without travelling being needed and at an affordable price. It is interesting to note how the demand for computer training has increased. In 1990 only 2.2% of males and 2.4% of females in a survey of 832 households thought that computer training was important. This can be compared to the number of people now involved in computer training courses.

In highlighting the need for education for development in the township one staff member remarked, “we say we want to be like Sandton [wealthy suburb next to Alex], but until we are educated we can't do it”. As far as possible, courses are accredited or linked to other institutions, which means that the qualification is worth much more when used to enter the South African job market. In addition, Kelly Temp

employment agency that is one of the tenants helps students who have completed computer training courses to find employment. The role of the Centre in finding employment is very important, especially in a country like South Africa where the unemployment rate is so high.

Funding issues appear to be the major difficulty faced by the Centre. The Centre generates income in many areas, however the costs of running a centre of this size are greater than the money brought in. This means that additional funding and sponsorship must be continually sought and some of the additional projects and services that members of staff wish to provide cannot be done at this point. This is an issue common to many such initiatives that target communities who are poor.

Linked to the problem of financial sustainability is that of equipment needs. The need for additional computers, especially with Internet connection so that people can access the Internet more than the 4 hours a day at present was noted by many of the staff members interviewed. In addition, the computers all have Windows 95 and Office 97. Staff report that many of the students who come for computer training are concerned about this as they want to learn the most up to date programmes. Thus, there is a need to upgrade software programmes, but this is also expensive. At present the centre does not use open source software, but this may be an avenue worth exploring as one means of dealing with financial sustainability issues.

When asked about how the centre could be developed in the future, the following issues came up. Staff noted the need for additional space so that the centre activities could be expanded. This included the provision of extra recreational activities and activities to encourage interaction between adults and youth. The need for an environmental focus and environmental education provision was also noted. Further, as noted above, the need for additional equipment and software upgrading was highlighted.

Conclusions

This report has provided an introduction to some of the central concepts underlying the *“Developing open learning communities for gender equity with the support of ICTs”* project. Each of these issues will be further explored as the project progresses with baseline data collection and participative needs assessments. The township of

Alexandra was described and in particular the diverse nature of the people living there highlighted. In the context of Alex township, the Alexsan Kopano Resource Centre plays a very important role, both in terms of the wide range of services the centre offers to the community as well in the introduction of ICTs to Alexandra. This particular role will be developed throughout this project. As noted at the outset, the definition of development assumed by UNESCO for this project is “positive change”, and the review of the history of the Alexsan Centre as well as its current services shows that this centre is indeed a force for positive change. This does not mean that difficulties are not faced and that some initiatives have not worked, but it does mean that the centre has developed a good working relationship with the community of Alex over the past 10 years, a relationship that is an appropriate foundation for building open learning communities.

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People Interviewed:

- Holly Luton Nel – Trust National Facilitator, Centre Director
- Ben Mhlongo – Centre Manager
- Sonny Mothopeng – Librarian
- Maryam Abrahams – Library assistant
- Bishop Selowa – Training Manager
- Godfrey Maredi – Trainer
- Abbey Sechoaro – Youth Desk Coordinator

Mapuleng Moatshe – Board Member and Deputy Principal of a local high schools

