

WHAT IS THE ULWAZI PROGRAM & HOW IS IT BENEFITING THE COMMUNITIES IN DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA?

THE AUTHOR GATHERED INFORMATION THROUGH INTERVIEWS, GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS, CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS, AND THE PROGRAM WEBSITE.

ULWAZI PROGRAM:

A MODEL FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION THROUGH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY & CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE

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OVERVIEW

Born of political shifts and a changing, post-apartheid policy environment that advanced a participatory approach to heritage, the Ulwazi Program is a South African library initiative set up by the eThekweni Municipality's Libraries and Heritage Department to "preserve and disseminate indigenous knowledge of local communities in the greater Durban area."¹ It creates a collaborative online database of local indigenous knowledge as part of the public library's digital resources, relying on community participation for delivering content and posting the content on the web.² The project is a collaborative, online, local knowledge resource in English and Zulu (the most commonly used languages in Durban), in the form of a "Wiki," much like Wikipedia, but localized for the eThekweni Municipality.

The program was established in 2008 in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It was the brainchild of a former senior librarian for software applications at the eThekweni Municipal Library, Betsie Greyling. Greyling worked with McNulty Consulting to translate her conceptual thinking into a practical project.³ The Ulwazi Program is the first project of its kind in South Africa because it promotes a "democratized collection policy" through the library with the use of basic digital media tools and community participation.⁴

THE ULWAZI PROGRAM MODEL

The Ulwazi Program model uses the existing public library infrastructure, social technologies, and volunteer "fieldworkers" from local communities served by the library. Fieldworkers are trained in digital media skills, digital media management, and oral history methodology. To get the program started, Greyling selected fieldworkers from communities within the municipality and, with the help of McNulty

Consulting, trained them to create digital audio and visual material such as recorded oral histories and photographs. Together with library staff, fieldworkers were then taught to add this content, in both English and Zulu, to the Ulwazi Program Wiki, using their local libraries and the Ulwazi Program's central office at the municipal library in Durban as submission points. The libraries also serve as Internet access points where communities can browse the Ulwazi Wiki and the Internet. They can also contribute to the Wiki if they have user accounts. Since 2010, the Ulwazi Wiki has allowed for submissions via cell phone through a program where contributors are paid in cell phone credit if their submissions are accepted.⁵

AIMS OF THE ULWAZI PROGRAM

Greyling designed the Ulwazi Program model based on her experience as a librarian. The primary aims of the Ulwazi Program, as a library-affiliated initiative, are thus the preservation, organization, and dissemination of knowledge on a wide scale, which as Greyling explained, "is what libraries do." She also expressed concern about "losing young people from the libraries" and saw a program that provided locally-generated content, delivered via a medium that was attractive to youth, namely the Internet and cell phones, as a drawcard. She believed that if she could implement a program that included these aspects, it would entice people back to the library.⁶

THE PROGRAM PROMOTES A "DEMOCRATIZED COLLECTION OF POLICY" THROUGH THE LIBRARY WITH THE USE OF BASIC DIGITAL MEDIA TOOLS AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION.

Key to the program is the use of new technologies to preserve and circulate local knowledge. It achieves this through an online repository to which local communities contribute digital content. The program thus deals with both preservation and the provision of access to resources. In an article that Greyling co-authored, she mentioned that, by “providing an online, contextually-based information service to local communities, public libraries in Africa will ensure future-oriented access to cultural heritage resources through twenty-first century information communication technologies (ICTs).”⁷ In another article, she argued that the Ulwazi Program seeks to enable local communities to become part of the global information society. The program’s model is based on the idea that access to a digital knowledge resource of local relevance facilitates the growth of digital and information literacy skills, promotes the preservation of local knowledge, and creates potential economic empowerment of communities through skills development and knowledge provision.⁸

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENTS AND POLICY

The Ulwazi Program model is based on community needs as identified by the municipal library, inputs from a number of stakeholders, and various national and international policies. According to Greyling, through library surveys from various library-using communities, the municipal library was “made aware of the needs in the communities: their lack of digital literacy, their lack of empowerment, the lack of digital skills, their lack of knowledge of their own communities, the fact that their indigenous knowledge was getting lost at an alarming rate.”⁹ The program follows the eThekweni Municipality’s Integrated Development Plan (IDP). The Municipal Systems Act 132 of 2000 requires that all municipalities in South Africa develop IDPs, which are

five-year strategic documents that direct all municipal activities and are reviewed annually in consultation with stakeholders and communities. Municipal IDPs are informed by both national governmental policy and local circumstances. The plans are implemented at the municipal level and aim to address locally-defined needs but must also follow the national government’s policy.¹⁰ In this way, the Ulwazi Program promoted, and was the product of, multi-stakeholder engagements.

THE ULWAZI PROGRAMME STROVE TO ENABLE LOCAL COMMUNITIES TO BECOME PART OF THE GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY. THE PROGRAMME MODEL IS BASED ON THE IDEA THAT ACCESS TO A DIGITAL KNOWLEDGE RESOURCE OF LOCAL RELEVANCE FACILITATES THE GROWTH OF DIGITAL AND INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS, THE PRESERVATION OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE, AS WELL AS POTENTIAL ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF COMMUNITIES THROUGH SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND KNOWLEDGE PROVISION.

The Ulwazi Program model was also informed by various national and international policy documents such as the Geneva Plan of Action, generated by the World Summit on the Information Society, which called for:

- Free or affordable access to information and knowledge via community access points (such as a digital library service);
- The development of Information Communication Technology (ICT) skills;

- The empowerment of local communities to use ICTs; and
- Policies that support the respect, preservation and promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity, and the generation of local content to suit the linguistic and cultural context of the users.¹¹

Indigenous knowledge as a concept and formal policy only came to Greyling’s attention after she had conceptualized the Ulwazi Program. However, she no doubt saw synergies between what she hoped to achieve with the program and the mandate for museums and libraries, as detailed in the national Indigenous Knowledge Systems Policy. The policy encourages indigenous and local communities to “actively record and share their contemporary history, culture and language” and emphasizes the creative use of new technologies to “support indigenous and local community development.”¹²

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE?

The Ulwazi Program’s interpretation of indigenous knowledge is loosely defined and flexible, although it is limited to the geographic boundaries of eThekweni Municipality.¹³ It offers the potential to promote cross-cultural understanding and inclusivity, and to accommodate a broad array of materials. The program has recorded numerous aspects of local history and culture including personal, family, and group histories, aspects of material culture unique to the Durban area, and a wealth of cultural practices relating to food, rites of passage, ceremonies, and celebrations, among other things. It is seen, and used, as a valuable source of local information representing the different cultural groupings found within the municipal borders, and as a platform for digital dialogue and cross-cultural and linguistic exchange of knowledge. The program currently receives over 60,000 visitors per month.

IT OFFERS THE POTENTIAL TO PROMOTE CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING, INCLUSIVITY AND ACCOMMODATE A BROAD ARRAY OF MATERIALS

ACHIEVEMENTS

The Ulwazi Program has had many accomplishments. It has established a digital library of local history and knowledge in English and Zulu. This library comprises over 800 articles and is currently larger than the Zulu Wikipedia. The project has trained over 20 fieldworkers in digital media management and digital skills and has collaborated with, and given training to students at four underserved peri-urban and rural schools. By providing access to a locally relevant resource in a local language, the program has promoted and supported digital and reading literacy. In recognition of the project’s efforts, in 2012 it received a Telkom Highway Award for Community Engagement through Technology.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ “About the Programme.” *About the Programme*. Ulwazi Programme, 8 January 2012. Web.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ ‘eThekweni’ is the Zulu name for Durban. eThekweni Municipality is the municipality that runs the city of Durban.
- ⁴ Following the establishment of the program, the Presidential National Commission on the Information Society and Development (PNC on ISAD) aimed to create a similar project on a national level, the National Digital Repository (NDR), and approached Betsie Greyling to elicit her perspective on how the national project should function. Through community participation, the NDR aimed to “collect, preserve, promote and disseminate South Africa’s cultural heritage” (National Digital Repository, n.d.).
- ⁵ “About the Programme.” *About the Programme*. Ulwazi Programme, 8 January 2012. Web.