

Can education help to address some of the systemic challenges in informal settlements?

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In South Africa, informal settlements - like many townships around the country - are characterised by poverty, high unemployment, crime, violence and poor access to even basic services, including education.



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Although the majority of those who live in informal settlements are able to access education for their children, schools are usually overcrowded, and the harsh reality is that these communities don't provide an environment which is conducive to studying. It's hard for learners to concentrate on their studies when hungry, fearing for their safety and having no access to electricity, for example.

The challenges, and there are many, related to education in informal settlements are systemic and affect the quality of life of those living in informal settlements in general. Poverty, unemployment, crime and violence, and lack of access to adequate and dignified basic service, all contribute to the way in which people access education.



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While education is by no means a panacea to all the systemic challenges faced by communities living in informal settlements, it can make an impactful contribution to improving the quality of life of these communities. We need to seriously revisit how we address these challenges so that we do not perpetuate an unjust education cycle from the very beginning.



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Despite the acknowledged benefits of early childhood development (ECD) education, access to ECD education is out of reach for most people living in informal settlements. Even those informal settlements that do have ECD centres, don't have enough centres and the majority are not particularly conducive to the safety and well-being of young children, or lack the expertise to implement a working curriculum. Exacerbating the problem is the fact that high rates of unemployment mean that many parents can't afford the cost of ECD education.

Mixed-use, multi-purpose facilities

Philippi Village is an integrated, mixed-use development situated in Cape Town's Cape Flats suburb of Philippi. Its primary focus is to act as a community hub and business catalyst for township communities by providing collaborative and secure workspaces for small and micro business owners, as well as creating employment opportunities and upskilling local community members while at the same time providing a vibrant and safe place for social engagement.

Business parks like Philippi Village, based as they are in township spaces, should be designed to be multi-purpose and to be utilised by different people at different times. To be successful they need to be co-created by the users and community to ensure they respond to community needs. This way, they can act as a connector between informal settlements, townships and greater society.

Hubs like Philippi Village have the ability to bring together local government, education organisations and those who can build and shape responses. Although we still have a long way to go at Philippi Village, we are taking the first steps to achieve this.



Bushra Razack, CEO, Philippi Village. Image supplied

Collaborations and opportunities

An onsite ECD centre caters to young children from both the adjacent informal settlement as well as the greater suburb of Philippi. The centre has partnered with organisations providing training and support to ECD teachers, including The Heart Shine Academy. The Academy assists children and youth in Philippi to help process trauma by participating in joyful, expressive curated art, music, dancing and drama activities. The healing journey offered to students by the Academy includes trauma counselling and life-coaching, as well as general social-awareness and community building.

Local schools have been invited to use the facilities on offer in Philippi Village including a running track and sports fields. Learners and students are provided with a safe space to study, free of charge, and on-site access to the City of Cape Town Library.

In addition, Philippi Village hosts tenants who run a variety of programmes to help learners meet National Senior Certificate requirements through tuition assistance and mentor support. Other tenants offer personal development support and computer literacy courses.

UCT's Graduate School of Business is another tenant. The GSB's Solution Hub was established at Philippi Village as part of a deliberate effort to deepen its roots and relevance as an African business school. The hub offers students, alumni, clients and local community entrepreneurs a place to meet and engage while also providing entrepreneurs with access to resources, corporate partners, mentors, advisory services and partnerships, amongst others. Facilities at the hub include several fully equipped meeting rooms as well as a lecture space.



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Philippi Village hosts regular open days, career days, holiday programmes to support the children of working parents and in 2022, hosted a science and robotics fair. In addition, SETA training is provided. Access to technology and coding is provided through CoderDojo, an international network of coding clubs for young people which is assisting the local community to develop coding skills.



Axolile Notywala, Board Member, The Philippi Village Project. Image supplied

Another tenant at Philippi Village is the South African chapter of Women in Tech, a global organisation that fosters inclusion, diversity and equity in STEAM, creating impact through action to build skills and confidence in order to set women up for success.

Recognising that education cannot be a goal on its own, at Philippi Village we are working hard to bring together different stakeholders to each play their own unique part in addressing the issues that most significantly affect the educational experience of people living in townships and informal settlements.

There is no question that to thrive, people need to live in livable environments. The current situation in informal settlements does not allow for people to live the lives they aspire to, including the ability to access quality education.

Addressing the systemic challenges in informal settlements and townships is a significant task that won't be achieved overnight. And while we cannot address every challenge, understanding where we can make a positive impact is an important first step.

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