# Transforming our communities for a digitally-led future

The world is undeniably moving rapidly and the global education landscape has evolved just as much in order to produce people with the necessary skill sets for the future. The focus is on the use of digital technologies to support education, places of work and bring about innovation that address challenges in communities, writes Thabang Bantsi after an in-depth interview with the founder of Siyafunda Community Technology Centre (CTC) Ahmed 'Smiley' Ismael.

Similarly, with the globalisation conversation of the early 1990s, the current shift to digitisation is essentially a promise, a threat and our current reality.

For South Africa, the question and uncertainty on the future of work is not a new topic of discussion—structural unemployment has been a major concern for years. Structural unemployment has permeated social conversations and is a highly controversial issue, where the unemployment rate is staggering. It should be noted that the technological advancements of the last 20 years have had two major results; an impressive economic boost for countries and businesses alike, but also, it has managed to develop extreme inequality in communities.

The truth of the matter is, we must not forget to go to the places with the least progress and development in South Africa. If we are serious about equality, we need to get serious about strengthening our education system. We must help the marginalised feel included in this ever-changing landscape. This is a statement that founder of Siyafunda Community Technology Centre (CTC) Ahmed Ismael, better known as 'Smiley' truly lives by and is actively applying through his work by bringing ICT and 4IR to previously underserviced and disadvantaged in
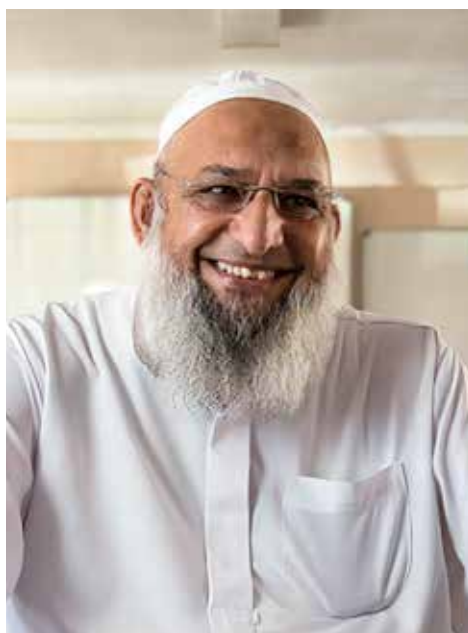
Ahmed Ismael

rural and township communities, Empowering, Educating, E-connecting communities through access to digital technologies and skills. Having developed his knowledge and passion for ICT while working for retail giant Massmart, is where his exposure and appreciation of computers and the world of IT emerged. Throughout

his upbringing, the notion and understanding that we have been created for the benefit of humankind and not just ourselves, is something that has resonated throughout Ahmed's life and echoed throughout the work that he does.

It was when Ahmed exited the corporate world, he realised just how much the country invested in ICT infrastructure for disadvantaged communities and this is the reason why India today, is regarded as a developer and leader of tech and not a consumer, which is the focus that South Africa should develop. Understanding that this is a major requirement for South Africa, Ahmed founded the social enterprise Siyafunda in 2006.

A sustainable solution

This is a thriving digital hub where people can access things such as computers, the internet, and other digital technologies that enable them to create, communicate, learn, gather information, and be challenged with others while they develop essential digital skills. This is packaged as affordable ICT-accredited courses and skills training for the community. Siyafunda is at the frontline of providing access, infrastructure support and the requisite training to South Africa's most vulnerable communities.

The core essence of these centres is to empower local people from rural and township

communities through equipping them with basic to advanced ICT skills. This is largely achieved through co-creation and engaging already existing community-based organisations within the townships. "We don't compete, we enable and compliment other centres and hubs in the townships and empower them to run their own programmes," says Ahmed. Through this model, a network of community knowledge centres (CKCs) run by community-based individuals emerged. These individuals have also served as the central point to begin the engagement process within communities. With over 200+ community knowledge centres, Siyafunda is without a doubt scaling at a rapid rate.

Ahmed has attributed the sustainability of Siyafunda hubs to key partnerships with stakeholders that he has strategically formed over the years. With strong, mutually beneficial relationships established with more than 50 partners from private and public (local, provincial and national government) sectors, as well as academic organisations.

The partnership model that Ahmed has developed is richly collaborative with stakeholder involvement from partners of the public, private and NGO sectors. Collaboration, engagement and two-way conversations are key in the success of the programmes and the hubs themselves. Siyafunda's notable key partners over the 15-year journey have been SAP, Cisco, Microsoft, Facebook, Google, JASA, Massmart, Digify Africa, Sage Foundation, Nairtime SA, Department of Communications and Digital Technologies, Gauteng Department of e-Government and City of Ekurhuleni.

How inequality in South Africa can be eradicated

There is absolute power in meeting people exactly where they are, in the environments that shape them and where they have their livelihoods. With respect to the various locations where this network of digital hubs can be found, Ahmed ensures that these are set up at extreme grassroots level in some of the considered "remote" locations to ensure that not only the easily accessible townships and locations are targeted. These include locations such as Vhembe, Mopani, Capricorn, Watersberg, Giyani, Sekhukhune to mention a few. It is also not recommended to employ a one-size-fits-all

approach to address issues that are specific to certain townships, which calls for the innovation and critical thinking of the individuals that are from these locations, and can tailor-make solutions that speak to their community.

When we think about it, inequality is truly a disheartening experience when one thinks of the realities of people not being afforded a decent quality of life, simply because they could not meet the demands of the changing times. Not only this, but for a country with citizens who are trailing behind in respect to education and skills, surely this will position the country to be not as competitive in the global market space as its counterparts. Skills are important, access to data is important, connection to the internet is important in the fight and eradication of inequality in South Africa.

Digital parity for women and girls
What then about representation? As women are a very integral part of society as nurturers and teachers within homes, female inclusion becomes an imperative to ensure that they too receive exposure to ICT knowledge and development. This interesting point of conversation with Ahmed, was about ensuring digital parity for women and girls in South Africa. "We can make space for women and girls to use their intelligence without reservation, and this is why Siyafunda is so dedicated to closing the gender gap in the ICT sphere, by pushing for 60% female representation in our programmes." Siyafunda celebrated with five million women and girls empowered with digital skills through a digital skills course called *#SheWillConnect* initiated by INTEL, where the hub was an implementing partner in South Africa.

Siyafunda was also part of the celebrations of international girls on ICT Day. Siyafunda CTC was an integral part of a campaign that creates cyber awareness amongst young women. This course exposed participants to the current cyber trends and how they work, threats facing organisations today, how to assist and how to protect your personal privacy online. After successful completion of the programme, participants earned a CISCO Networking Academy badge that serves as proof of training to potential employers.

Through the Facebook project *#SheMeansBusiness* from 2019, over 15 000 women-owned businesses in rural and township areas were empowered and upskilled with digital marketing skills to enhance and grow their businesses.

Through the JASA Youth Enterprise Development programme from 2017, over 1 000 women were trained on a year-long programme of entrepreneurship.

4IR: a world of opportunities
Another major point of discussion is that technology and the shift to digital should not be considered a bad or a daunting thing–it simply opens up a world of opportunities and it is up to us to decide how individuals and communities choose to utilise and take advantage of the knowledge once it presents itself. This becomes an important conversation with people who have not had proper exposure to the world of digital and is a bit uncertain as to what to expect. Siyafunda is helping build stories so that even the most non-technical person can start, build and manage complex technology as well as businesses.

One of the programmes that is resonating with the students, is that of the demystification of 4IR. We often hear about the term 4IR being used in theoretical conversation, but do people truly understand what it actually entails? Through the use of an innovative and simplistic approach, the 4IR demystification programme helps young students in understanding those difficult and complex technologies. Different skills are required–where 4IR demands critical thinking instead of the conventional way of thinking that requires memorising facts. With projects that include robotics and coding, the aim of these programmes is to make the content relevant for the students so that they can apply scenarios that will impact their own communities.

Support from public and private sectors
On discussion of the issue of support from public and private sectors, there was certainly a strong sense of support and partnership that were instrumental in the success of Siyafunda's digital hubs. However, distinguishing between simply good intentions and actual sustainable impact with the creation of these hubs and programmes, is even more important. "It is crucial that our hubs do not amount to just one-day open days and a lot is promised to the community but there is no sustainability in the work that we put out." For Ahmed, longevity and mapping out people's journey is an integral part of the process and measurement for the overall success of the Siyafunda hubs.

As we've seen in the last two years and with the onset of COVID-19, remote work has formed a crucial part of the world of work and a competitive economy. COVID-19 also brought existing inequalities to the forefront. Giving people the opportunity be able to work remotely, regardless of where they are in the world, is just one of the ways to help bridge the digital divide. COVID-19 has also added a new dimension for the Siyafunda team by having to move the programme offering to a more hybrid model, allowing students to also be part of the programmes from the comfort of their homes. This was made possible by subsidised data for students and the right virtual support.

Another point that came out quite strongly from Ahmed, is that government should also look into creating interventions and partnerships with tech leaders and communities who are making strides in this sphere, and endeavour to assist with the upskilling of people who don't have access by creating scalable, sustainable channels of learning and ultimately the right skills for the job market or to run businesses.

Coding is an element of ICT that cannot be ignored when developing these programmes that need to be implemented. Through an

initiative spearheaded by SAP, Africa Code Week is the story of hundreds of schools, teachers, governments, and nonprofits getting together to bridge the digital and gender skills gap in Africa. The objective of Africa Code Week is to empower the young generation by helping them learn the coding skills they need in order to thrive in the 21st century.

In 2019, Siyafunda was instrumental in achieving the following:
- Total boys trained – 41 765
- Total girls trained – 44 014
- Total number of trainers and school teachers trained – 2 394
- Total number of coding training workshops/ sessions – 500+

The digital divide

With all these technical skills being at the hands of the students, Siyafunda also ensures that there is the right balance of soft skills introduced as a requirement in the world of business or work. These soft skills include design thinking, which becomes crucial in developing new systems, ideas and proto- types. Siyafunda also emphasises on honing critical and agile thinking of the students, as well ensuring they understand how emotional intelligence can play a vital role in their success and business or within the workspace context. Various personality assessments are conducted so the students also learn about themselves and the elements that make them an individual.

It certainly has also become imperative to link technological and digitisation discussions to issues of national and societal importance, such as sustainable development aims and developing township and local economies with the national plan. More importantly, what should a political agenda be addressing and what does the emancipated use of technology involve when it comes to the development skills for people? Certainly, a lot to ponder and even more so to attain with reference to the issues of structural unemployment in this country.

Siyafunda has leveraged community participation with government by having these conversations with the likes of former Minister Trevor Manuel and aligning the social economy with the objectives of the Nation Development Plan (NDP). In understanding how the social economy can contribute to overall socio-economic growth, both government and communities can derive mutually beneficial relationships in people who possess the right

skills. One way of addressing this digital divide is by introducing programmes that speak to developing innovation and by providing com- prehensive training that helps with simple, yet effective digital coaching to young people at local and township level. While focusing on the youth, the implementation of "Digital Smart Schools or Centres" to allow people to learn and have exposure to digital skills from an early age.

Siyafunda is actively involved in developing curricula and programmes to aid the accelera- tion and adoption of ICT and 4IR skills training in schools where the objective is to:
- Design localised content that is engaging and fun that demystifies technologies under the 4IR umbrella;
- Overcome the current skills challenges by providing essential basic ICT skills that cover a number of critical domains required for all relevant programmes of today;
- Build a capacity of digitally skilled teachers that will support their schools and learners in the most effective way; and
- Promote the use and adoption of technology and virtual learning tools in schools.

Looking at the year ahead, Ahmed would like to focus on still developing three areas of the Siyafunda model; community partner level, partner level and grassroots level. The focus for the community partners is to continue building relationships at grassroots, while the partnership level certainly is to grow the value chain of partners as well as implement the relevant programmes with the communities. With regards to grassroots, Ahmed hopes to champion the relationship-building element within the communities through the community

partners. There are also plans to launch more digital hubs in the near future as Siyafunda receives almost daily requests from communi- ties to come to their areas.

The South African government and its social partners are essentially challenged with shaping the dynamics of the technological and digital transformation process that will help develop people. What is critical on the agenda of the relevant institutions and organisations, is providing the necessary skills in order for the playing field to be levelled out and aggressively narrow the vast digital divide that currently exists.

One can conclude by saying that in order for history not to repeat itself, we need people such as Ahmed and centres such as Siyafunda to mobilise a learning and development process that generates a new vision on the way forward and set up major transformative goals when it comes to addressing inequality and the issue of the digital divide.

This humanity desperately needs such initiatives to push towards a more inclusive, more just society. One thing that came through clearly from engaging with Ahmed, was that there is an urgency to help people, to impact others and help them to develop the right skills, knowledge and understanding of how to move towards a better future. Acceleration of digital inclusion is what is going to shape South Africa's modern economy and make it an integral part of this evolving digital commu- nity. Siyafunda has received numerous local, national and international accolades, awards and recognition for its work. Thank you Ahmed and the Siyafunda team for being champions of this mammoth task. ▲