

# Sustaining Livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa

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## ***Reflect* and the SLA: exploring linkages and opportunities for strengthening livelihoods with literacy practice**

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### Editor's notes

'To what extent can literacy be considered as a priority in reducing poverty and securing livelihoods?' Evidence of success and impact of previous interventions are mixed (DFID, 2000: 12). Yet illiteracy is seen as both a symptom and a cause of poverty and poor living conditions. This article explores the conceptual links between literacy and the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) by exploring *Reflect*, an approach to adult education and development that connects literacy education with community action.

Our thanks to Sonja Belete (nee Labuschagne) and Louise Seedat (nee Knight) who have written this SLSA using extracts from material by David Archer and Ian MacPherson. Sonja and Louise can be contacted through SARN, the South Africa Reflect Network (see end of article for contact details).

### Introduction

According to the 2008 Global Monitoring Report, 774 million adults globally (15 years and older) are illiterate, of which two thirds are women. It is also commonly understood that many more people worldwide experience serious challenges because they are not 'functionally' literate in relation to their environment; for example immigrants who are using a language or script different from what they learned at home. Of the 774 million adults who are 'officially' illiterate, sub-Saharan Africa accounts for about one in five of these.

Literacy is increasingly accepted as an 'invisible glue' to achieving many development goals, from securing livelihoods, empowerment of women, improved health and nutrition, increased productivity and poverty reduction, conscientization of the poor and excluded, enhanced political participation, and sensitisation to environmental issues. Denial of literacy is not just a human rights violation but also a critical indicator of gender injustice. In today's globalised world it is critical to have the ability to access and use information, critically engage with issues and institutions relevant to one's life and have the confidence and space in which to make one's voice heard. Literacy has shown that it has the scope for enhancing these sorts of capabilities and practices and is therefore a powerful aspect of the development response to poverty, vulnerability and isolation (Betts, 2002: 61). Indeed as Stromquist states (2005:12), "literacy skills are fundamental to informed decision-making, personal empowerment, active and passive participation in local and global social community".

But literacy programmes can be removed from the broader context of people's lives. Sustainable livelihoods approaches offer a potential way forward, providing the very opportunity to contextualise literacy within the livelihoods of the poor (DFID, 2002: 5). At the same time approaches like *Reflect* bring literacy into the realm of development and sustainable livelihoods and offer opportunities to integrate these key concepts in development programmes.

### What is *Reflect*?

*Reflect* is a structured, **participatory approach to adult literacy and development** that fuses the theories of Paulo Freire and the practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). Initially developed by Action Aid, it places empowerment at the heart of a sustainable development process by facilitating people's critical analysis of their own environment (Phnuyal, Archer and Cottingham, 1998: 29). In this process the development of literacy and other communication skills becomes closely linked to the engagement of people in wider processes of development and social change.

In the *Reflect* approach, a 'circle' is established by a group of participants from an existing group such as a farming co-operative or constituting a new group with common development objectives. Circle members identify a community problem and then, through a process of group dialogue and analysis, decide how to help solve it. To do this they are supported by a local facilitator from the community who has been trained in the *Reflect* approach. It is important to avoid school-style exercise books or approaches that echo the often disempowering practice of conventional 'teaching'. Materials and resources should be locally developed and may include beans, seeds, leaves and stones, as well as a black- or whiteboard. The group meets at least twice a week for two hours, for at least a year. Facilitators focus on process more than content and emphasise the respect for existing knowledge and experience of participants, as well as action based on reflection.

Creating an **ongoing democratic space for reflection, learning and action** is central to *Reflect*. At all levels *Reflect* focuses on participants generating their own learning materials, systematising their existing knowledge and critically analysing their experience. A range of participatory tools are used, including the construction of maps, calendars, matrices, visualisations; and the use of drama, story-telling and songs. The focus of all these is to explore power dynamics and critical issues within the social, economic, cultural and political environment

of participants. In the process of undertaking this comprehensive analysis participants also learn to strengthen their capacity to communicate using whatever means is most relevant to them – whether learning to read or write, accessing a second language, gaining confidence to speak up or speak out, or having access to new information and communication technologies.

This **focus on communication** is another key feature of *Reflect* – the capacity to communicate and be heard is determined by power relationships that need to be analysed. Being unable to communicate is both a cause and effect of inequitable power relationships” (ibid.: 5). Addressing the following types of power are conceived as critical: government (understanding the complex bureaucracy and procedures of the State), economic (the mystification of numbers in, inter alia, the market place, with money-lenders and landowners), social (the correlation between the ability to communicate and social status, the level to which someone is heard is often linked to literacy), political (public rallies, posters and the importance of budgets), religious (icons and texts which sanctify the written word), civic (the ritualised practice of civic institutions such as unions and community organisations where in largely non-literate societies chairpersons and treasurers are the literate and numerate few), and organisational (the role that individuals in organisations implementing *Reflect* play and the persona they create).

#### **Box 1 *Reflect's* core elements**

9 core elements run through the many diverse contexts where *Reflect* can be applied:

- **Power and Voice** asserts that focusing on the practical use of communication skills is where learning really occurs and learning new communication skills should be based on the most relevant and appropriate means of the members;
- *Reflect* recognises that achieving **social change and justice is a political process** rather than merely the amelioration of people’s material conditions and basic needs, and therefore “seeks to help people in the struggle to assert their rights, challenge injustice and change their position in society” (ActionAid 2003: 2);
- Implicit within this is the deliberate **creation of democratic space** in which everyone’s voice is given equal weight, which does not happen naturally. It is therefore counter-cultural and challenges local power relations and stratifications which cause inequality;
- It is both **an intensive and extensive process** which necessitates regular meetings;
- *Reflect* is further **grounded in existing knowledge** and begins with what people know rather than transferring knowledge or importing information. Key is giving people control of the knowledge generation process so individuals can be critical and selective;
- Critically, *Reflect* is based on **linking reflection and action**, emphasizing learning for the sake of change;
- Reflection is generated using **participatory tools** to create an environment where all members participate;
- As participatory tools can be distorted or used manipulatively, they are centred on a core **awareness of power**: “Reflect is a political process in which the multiple dimensions of power and stratification are always the focus of reflection, and actions are oriented towards changing inequitable power

relationships, whatever their basis. Only through such analysis can effective strategic actions be determined" (ibid.: 3);

- Reflect emphasises **coherence and self-organisation** "so that groups should be self-managed, where possible, rather than being facilitated by, or dependent on, outsiders" (ibid.).

A critical characteristic is *Reflect's* flexibility; its capacity to be adapted so that it is uniquely shaped and locally owned in each context. Sometimes therefore, the learning or education outcomes are overt: in a rural province in southeast South Africa for example, the Family Literacy Project uses *Reflect* to teach mothers to read to their children. Sometimes it's subtle: the healthcare workers of Vukuzenzele (see below) practice spelling and writing by recording their goals, although it is never described as a lesson.

### *Reflect* in practice: the Vukuzenzele Reflect Community Organisation (VRCO)

Vukuzenzele<sup>1</sup> Reflect Community Organisation (VRCO) is based in Gauteng, South Africa. Seven VRCO community members were first introduced to *Reflect* in 2003. When the NGO they were operating under folded these seven members decided to set up their own CBO. They used *Reflect* tools to develop their constitution and to make decisions about how they wanted the structure of their CBO to be shaped. They successfully recruited a group of volunteers with technical expertise in project management and development work to serve with them as members on their Board. They attracted the services of a prestigious firm of lawyers to act on their behalf on a pro-bono basis to help formally register the organisation and to provide on-going legal advice. They also successfully gained the support of an auditing company to support the financial governance of the organisation on a pro-bono basis. During this time, the VRCO members introduced *Reflect* to their community and began the process of identifying issues relevant to people's lives. This provided baseline information which they integrated into their three-year strategic plan. Using their acquired facilitation skills, the group members developed their strategic plan and shared their outputs with their existing circle members for further consolidation. In addition, the members attracted funding from several sources who took interest in their use of *Reflect* and/or their stated objectives and planned activities.

VRCO are now implementing their strategic plan and managing their activities, while consistently monitoring and evaluating their progress through meetings, discussion forums and an open door feedback policy. In 2008 they intend to review their strategic plan with all members of the organisation to provide an opportunity for any changes or additions to be discussed and agreed. At the end of 2007 the organisation was working with just over 120 members on various initiatives including a community garden and home-based care service. In addition VRCO operates a sewing and crafts project which attracts "regular orders for products, especially aprons, from other local organisations and community members"; and a youth arts, dance and drama group who "use their talents to share their learnings from discussions during their *Reflect* circle meetings with wider community audiences".

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<sup>1</sup> Vukuzenzele means "wake up and do for yourself" in the Zulu language.

### Box 2 Examples of VRCO's projects

A **community garden** was established by three local residents after using *Reflect* to learn agricultural skills. It is now producing a range of vegetables for sale and is self-sustaining "due to the interest and support of the wider community". Once a month, they use *Reflect* to decide how much money to take home and how much to use for seed, garden tools, or other business expenses. We use *Reflect* in everything we do," says Mr. Mabuya, who left school after 10th grade. "We knew when we started it wasn't going to be a short-term thing. We knew it was long term. If we want more money, we have to look forward. What *Reflect* has taught us is to go from one step to another." Last year, they successfully petitioned a non-profit organisation to install three water taps in their garden. They want to plant more and improve their maths and business skills.

A **home-based care service** is reaching 25 local households, predominantly supporting people living with AIDS. The service hopes to reach 200 people by mid 2008. The volunteer health workers have no formal nurses' training, but help neighbours by bathing them, doing housework, or bringing food. Most of the women have rudimentary reading and writing skills. Now they aim to acquire more medical knowledge, such as understanding prescription labels

The facilitators all live in the informal settlement of Orange Farm near Johannesburg where the organisation is based. They are proud of the success of their organisation and have said, "We are extremely pleased at the success and achievements of VRCO. The prospect of expanding our activities is not just a great step forward for our organisation but will bring even more opportunities for people in Orange Farm to participate in making their own decisions regarding their own future development and progress."<sup>2</sup>

*Reflect* has been successful in linking the literacy acquisition process with individual and community empowerment – strengthening the capacity of millions of excluded people, particularly women, to secure their basic rights. As well as addressing the core social problem of illiteracy *Reflect* has proved a powerful catalyst for people taking control of their own lives, for the spread of democratic values from the ground up and as an effective force for social change.

### Box 3 Examples of where *Reflect* has been used

*Reflect* has evolved dramatically over the years where it has been used for:

- Building peace and reconciliation in Burundi;
- Challenging caste discrimination in Nepal;
- Opposing domestic violence in Peru;
- Strengthening local democracy in South Africa;
- Consolidating the landless people's movement in Brazil;
- Teaching English to refugees in Canada;
- Facilitating people-centred local planning in India;
- Giving children a voice in Pakistan;
- Mobilising for basic rights and improved governance in Nigeria;
- Deepening cultural identity in the Basque Country.

There are many examples of programmes that report significant development benefits ranging from improved health, women's empowerment, diversified and enhanced livelihoods, active

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<sup>2</sup> Bongane Radebe, former Project Coordinator

citizenship, HIV prevention and girls' education - suggesting that an empowering adult learning process may provide that invisible glue for attaining the Millennium Development Goals.

*Reflect* widens our understanding of literacy as an extended process involving a complex set of communicative practices – all of which have an impact on people's ability to assert their rights or to actively engage with their external world, whether it might be with the State, local markets, organisations, etc. The approach reveals the intimate connections between literacy and development, power and powerlessness at all levels (Archer, 1998: 100 - 101). This was confirmed in a recent global survey of *Reflect* practice which showed that most organizations applying *Reflect* regard it as the underpinning for an integrated approach to development, strengthening peoples' literacy, their livelihoods and their voices as active citizens.

## Methodological linkages between *Reflect* and SLA

But there remains a considerable challenge to demonstrate the wider implications of the place of literacy within the SLA. When looking at the links between *Reflect* and the SLA it is mainly about exploring the synergies between their respective **principles**. Betts (2002: 62-63) observes that participants at the December 2000 Nepal conference on Literacy and Livelihoods have noted that many lessons learnt from best practice in literacy programmes cohere with the principles of the SLA that are primarily about being people-centred, strengths-based, responsive and participatory, conducted in partnership, multi-level and sustainable.

One fundamental principle is **empowerment** of people so that they have a voice in affairs concerning their lives. Some literacy approaches want people to be empowered and able to function better in their own world while others are more radical and believe that people should be empowered to influence change and work towards social justice in their societies. The *Reflect* approach aims to strengthen people's capacity to communicate by whatever means of communication are most relevant or appropriate to them, bearing in mind that literacy forms part of communication practices and strategies. *Reflect* is based on the recognition that achieving social change and greater social justice is fundamentally a political process. *Reflect* is therefore not a neutral process and seeks to help people in the struggle to assert their rights, challenge injustice and change their position in society (Archer and Newman, 2003). In this respect the *Reflect* approach resonates with the empowerment emphasis of the SLA and also aligns itself with the governance principles and the rights-based approach that many organisations have adopted as part of the SLA.

The SLA promotes a more **holistic and integrated** way of addressing poverty and development. A body of research and evaluations of literacy work in recent years have shown that literacy initiatives generally work better when they form part of a holistic approach to development, rather than as stand-alone approaches (Betts, 2002: 63). This requires more cross-sectoral work and the SLA provides a framework that enables different sectors to locate themselves within this wider picture and define their roles within literacy for livelihoods programmes (DFID, 2000: 14). This will also call for working in **partnerships** across sectors and at **micro-macro levels**.

Likewise an increasing body of ethnographic studies of literacy and communication practices has shown that conventionally defined illiterate people have in fact their own complex social practices of literacy and their own networks of support. The main starting point for literacy work

should therefore be what people already have, know and do, and **build on their existing strengths**. This is also one of the principles of the SLA.

The wider sustainable livelihoods framework can provide a useful tool in helping locate literacy within people's lives and livelihoods. As a conceptual framework it has potential for increasing an understanding of the synergies between literacy and livelihoods and can therefore assist practitioners to contextualise literacy within the livelihoods of the poor, in relation to their assets and activities they carry out in the form of livelihood strategies, as well as the wider environment in which they operate (DFID, 2002).

Some writers place literacy firmly within the '**human capital** or 'capabilities' box within the livelihoods framework (Scott-Goldman, 2001: 11). Greater degrees of literacy skills also make it easier to acquire other capabilities. Andrew Miller (2000:9) pointed out at a South African conference on literacy and adult education "Training is made easier and done more cost-effectively when basic levels of literacy and numeracy are there." Technical and vocational skills cannot be taken very far if the learner does not have basic computer, reading and writing skills. The link between having literacy skills and people's health has also been explored in many studies. Women's literacy for instance has an important effect on infant mortality and on child survival through better nutrition and immunization (Brown, 1990: 28).

However literacy is more than a capability or human capital asset. It also contributes to people's self-esteem and their ability to participate in social networks and community development initiatives. It could therefore also be a **social asset** or resource (DFID, 2002: 5) and a key tool needed to pursue different livelihood strategies assisting people to optimise their resource base, both social and material. It is here where the use of literacy skills becomes of major importance and allows people to take up opportunities they might otherwise not be aware of or have the ability to take up. Scott-Goldman (2001:11) notes the link between having literacy skills and the ability to manage financial resources as well as having access to resources such as development grants, welfare and pension grants and coping with bureaucratic processes to obtain these resources, often in a different language than the mother tongue. In contrast, poor literacy skills can increase one's vulnerability and dependency on other people (Scott-Goldman, 2001: 12).

## Implications for practice

As far as literacy approaches are concerned, *Reflect* has already moved far in incorporating literacy with development and empowerment and can be further enhanced by drawing from the SLA. These considerations also have value for SLA practitioners in the sense that they have to take cognisance of the importance and impact of literacy on sustainable livelihoods.

Both approaches incorporate elements of rights-based approaches as far as empowerment is concerned. But how to operationalise this remains a challenge. The *Reflect* learning process that includes dialogue and implementing action points makes an attempt, but is often hindered by a needs-based environment and attitude amongst community members where people are often not ready to challenge local structures. Implementing agencies should seek to ensure that the micro and macro environment allows for empowering processes without fear of intimidation. Civil society organisations can play an especially important role in this regard.

Adopting a holistic view encourages working in **partnerships** because few organisations can address all the issues emerging in communities. Such partnerships should be formed across sectors such as literacy and development organisations, which in itself represent health, water and sanitation and other sectors, but also between government and civil society at various levels. Such an integrated approach demands extensive preparation to clarify partner roles and the objectives of any initiative which should reflect both literacy and development indicators that will contribute to sustainable livelihoods.

But many rural communities have also experienced disillusion with adult literacy programmes and their immediate needs around their poverty situation might have higher importance. So it is important to contextualize any work within a community as developmental in nature and to incorporate literacy strategies that will **enhance overall livelihood outcomes**.

Facilitators require the ability to play this **dual role of development and literacy facilitator**, but most of all have the ability to understand the place of literacy in development and sustainable livelihoods. Their training should cover the conceptual linkages between the two concepts as well as the practical know-how of integration.

Livelihoods assessments should incorporate questions that will assist the implementing agencies to determine the present literacy events in people's lives and how it relates to their livelihood, but also how they cope with literacy tasks and who they rely on for help. This can highlight opportunities for intervention. It could also show where approaches and agencies should complement each other to ensure an integrated approach.

## Conclusion

Whilst the focus of *Reflect* practice tends to remain on literacy conceived within a wider framework of communication and power it can also be a thread woven through the SLA and a guiding tool to systematise thinking about the location of literacy in people's daily lives. Finding these relevant entry points can help ensure that any intervention will be more effective in enabling participants to become protagonists in their own lives.

## Endnote

*Reflect* won the UN Literacy Prize in 2003, 2005 and 2007. There are at least 500 organisations in 70 countries actively connected to CIRAC (the international Reflect network) who are using the approach.

Currently *Reflect* is implemented by a wide range of partners including small community based organisations, local, national or international NGOs, local or national governments, social movements and people's organisations. Governments have been involved in piloting / implementing *Reflect* in Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Ghana and perhaps most notably Peru (where 180,000 participants were involved in a national programme run by the women's ministry

PROMUDEH, involving 55 partner organisations). Many of the organisations that are donors to *Reflect* programmes are also running their own *Reflect* programmes.<sup>3</sup>

The South Africa Reflect Network (SARN) aims to strengthen the lives of poor and excluded people and encourage them to become vibrant and vocal members of civil society by:

- building a critical mass of civil society organisations effectively practising Reflect, and;
- sharing learning and strengthening quality delivery of Reflect programmes of action.

By creating a structured and well resourced representative network of Reflect practitioners, participants and advocates, SARN has a key role to play in contributing to the realisation of the rights of poor and vulnerable people, and of women in particular. SARN can be contacted at

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<sup>3</sup> There is a huge range of donors who have supported *Reflect* programmes in different parts of the world over recent years, including: DFID, SDC, SNV, Dutch Embassy, Comic Relief, SCF (UK, US, Japan), CARE, CAFOD, GOAL, Acord, Oxfam (GB, Belgium), Novib, Helvitas, Intermons, Enfants du Monde, WUS, ICCO, Lutheran World Federation, Christian Aid, Ayuda en Accion, Aide et Action, *DVV international*, EZE, Banyan Tree Foundation, Niarchos Foundation, Sylvia Adams Trust, Psion Computers, the European Union, UNDP, UNICEF, the World Bank. Many UNESCO offices around the world have sent representatives to participate in *Reflect* workshops. The costs of *Reflect* programmes vary from place to place, eg ranging from \$18 per capita in Bangladesh to \$55 per capita in El Salvador.

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## Useful resources

CIRAC web-site [www.reflect-action.org](http://www.reflect-action.org) - now bilingual (English / Spanish)

Pamoja (Africa Reflect Network) website [www.pamojareflect.org](http://www.pamojareflect.org) (English/French)

Archer, D. and Newman, K. (2003) Communication and Power. London: ActionAid.

Attwood, G. (2008) Reflect Training of Trainers (TOT) – Guidelines for Practitioners. Johannesburg: South Africa Reflect Network.

Fransman J. (2007) Reading Between the Lines – a comparative study of policy and practice in Tanzania and Vietnam in light of the International Benchmarks on Adult Literacy. London: ActionAid

## Upcoming events

### **Managing for Impact (MfI), Haramaya University, Ethiopia 15 - 25 September 2008**

The Strengthening Managing for Impact Programme (SMIP) will be hosting a training workshop on Managing for Impact. The workshop aims to continue with developing and strengthening capacity of individual service providers and practitioners within Eastern & Southern Africa to support pro-poor projects to effectively manage toward impact.

For more information about this workshop, please email Keneilwe Thipe on [keneilwe@khanya-aicdd.org](mailto:keneilwe@khanya-aicdd.org). Strengthening Managing for Impact Programme (SMIP) is an IFAD Funded Capacity Building Programme. Further details about this training event can be at [http://www.khanya-aicdd.org/site\\_files/index.asp?pid=107](http://www.khanya-aicdd.org/site_files/index.asp?pid=107)

### **REFLECT Training of Trainers (TOT), Kumasi, Ghana 12<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> October 2008.**

For details contact Pamoja Ghana on [pamojaghana@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:pamojaghana@yahoo.co.uk)

### **South Africa Reflect Network (SARN) AGM, Johannesburg 10<sup>th</sup> October 2008**

This will also be the official launch of SARN's recently published Reflect Training of Trainers (TOT) – Guidelines for Practitioners

For details, contact SARN on +27 (0)11 403 7321 or [louise.seedat@sareflect.org](mailto:louise.seedat@sareflect.org)

### **November 2008**

**Launch of a New Evaluation Framework for *Reflect*** developed by 78 practitioners across 38 countries worldwide and in four languages – for details please contact SARN on +27 (0)11 403 7321 or [kas.sempere@sareflect.org](mailto:kas.sempere@sareflect.org)

### **Making Change Real: Transforming the Development System to promote sustainable livelihoods, University of KwaZulu-Natal**

#### **24<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> November 2008**

Khanya-aicdd and the Community Development Programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) will be hosting a 4 day regional meeting that will provide the basis for a book of in-depth analyses of development issues.

Past editions of SLSA - available at [www.khanya-aicdd.org](http://www.khanya-aicdd.org)

24	March 2008	An integrated approach to improving livelihoods: the Cata story
23	May 2007	Zimbabwe's Protracted Relief Programme
22	February 2007	Adding value to development through Human Rights-

		based approaches
21	December 2006	Monitoring & Evaluation as Learning: Rethinking the dominant paradigm
20	August 2006	Local and Community Driven Development: Principles and Evolution
19	May 2006	Decentralisation
18	Feb 2006	Local institutions and participatory development
17	Nov 2005	Participatory forest management (PFM)
16	Sept 2005	FAO's work on People-centred development with a livelihoods perspective (PCD-L)
15	July 2005	Shelter and livelihoods
14	Sept 2004	Community-based management
13	June 2004	Learnings about the sustainable livelihoods approach
12	Feb 2004	Sustainable livelihoods and small-scale mining
11	Oct 2003	Sustainable livelihoods and gender
10	June 2003	Community-based natural resources management
9	April 2003	Community-based workers as a model for pro-poor service delivery
8	Feb 2003	Institutional support for sustainable livelihoods
7	Sept 2002	Local economic development and sustainable livelihoods
6	June 2002	HIV/AIDS and sustainable livelihoods
5	March 2002	Social capital and sustainable livelihoods
4	Dec 2001	Rights-based approach to development
3	Sept 2001	Corporate Citizenship
2	July 2001	Community-based Planning
1	May 2001	The sustainable livelihoods approach

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*Sustaining Livelihoods in Southern Africa is an initiative of the Khanya-African Institute for Community-Driven Development (Khanya-aicdd). The editors are Ian Goldman, Khanya's CEO, and Rachel Searle-Mbullu a Khanya-aicdd Senior Associate. Ian can be contacted at [goldman@khanya-aicdd.org](mailto:goldman@khanya-aicdd.org) and Rachel at [rachel@khanya-aicdd.org](mailto:rachel@khanya-aicdd.org)*

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