

SADiLaR collaboration seeks to preserve SA's indigenous languages online

Issued by [North-West University \(NWU\)](#)

14 Sep 2023

The South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR) is collaboratively launching an exciting new initiative with the world's largest encyclopedia, Wikipedia, and the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), to promote and celebrate the use of South African languages.



Known in short as SWiP (for SADiLaR-Wikipedia-PanSALB), the project seeks to encourage South Africa's broad community of language users, especially those of languages that are underrepresented, to actively contribute their knowledge to the free Wikipedia platform. This is in line with UNESCO's International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022 – 2032), a global effort to draw attention to the critical situation of many indigenous languages, and to mobilise communities and resources for their preservation, revitalisation and promotion.

"A language is alive and well when it is used," says SADiLaR's Director of Operations Juan Steyn. "The SWiP project provides access to the broader community, not just the academic sector, to take part in preserving our African languages, and will contribute to opening up access to knowledge in multiple languages."

According to PanSALB's chief executive officer, Lance Schultz, the goal is to ensure that communities without access to printed media can still access electronic formats. "As we enter the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), organisations like PanSALB and SADiLaR are exploring ways to increase indigenous languages' footprint in digital media. By ensuring that communities without access to written material can still access electronic formats, we allow individuals to learn at their own pace and acquire language skills and knowledge within a multilingual space," he comments.

Protecting indigenous languages from disappearing over time

The official launch of SWiP will take place on Wednesday, 20 September 2023 at UNISA's Main Campus (Muckleneuk) in Pretoria, and the project is scheduled to run from October 2023 to October 2024.

"The first cycle of the project will focus on in-depth Wikipedia authorship training at 10 universities across the country, whereas the second cycle will comprise one-day events to allow for trained participants to run their own training events,"

Steyn explains.

According to Bobby Shabangu, president of Wikimedia ZA (the South African chapter of Wikimedia movement), there is a serious lack of online presence when it comes to South African languages and content.

“The majority of Africans read from the internet rather than contribute towards it. This project is a great initiative to help preserve South African indigenous languages from disappearing over time. It is creating a platform for people to contribute to their preservation and is aiming for a long-term documentation and preservation of their languages,” he remarks.

Shining a spotlight on isiNdebele

Wikipedia is a non-profit organisation that relies heavily on volunteers to write, translate and review content. A [recent summary](#) of the status of Wikipedia articles in South African languages and the biggest contributors for each language in 2022 (compiled by Wikimedia ZA member Ian Gilfillan) shows that, other than English and Afrikaans, isiZulu has the highest number of articles, followed by Sepedi (Northern Sotho), isiXhosa, Sesotho, Setswana, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, siSwati, and isiNdebele (incubator only) in the last place.

“Even in the more active South African languages on Wikipedia, there are really not a lot of contributors compared to the speaker communities,” Steyn says. “This project aims to increase contributors in all languages but with a special focus on isiNdebele, given that it is still listed as being in the incubator stage with very few articles and authors working on the language.”

It is for this reason that the official launch event of SWiP will shine a spotlight specifically on isiNdebele to encourage amaNdebele communities to actively participate in contributing to Wikipedia and in this way address the serious lack of articles on Wikipedia.

“We hope that by the end, of what we trust will become a yearly project through strong collaborating partners, isiNdebele will move from incubator to an active Wikipedia language,” Steyn adds.

“Utilising platforms such as Wikipedia is crucial because it has a large presence in South Africa and internationally,” Schultz says. “Wikipedia provides a valuable platform for preserving and promoting indigenous languages due to its extensive knowledge base. Additionally, we recognise the importance of prioritising languages like isiNdebele that lack articles on Wikipedia. Through our partnership with SADiLaR and Wikipedia, we aim to build a strong repository for these languages.”

Get involved

Individuals: Are you passionate about languages, culture, and the power of written expression? By joining the SWiP authorship training programme, you can learn how to actively contribute to the preservation of South Africa’s indigenous languages by writing new content, translating and reviewing existing content, or fixing any typos you may come across. The SWiP project team will be in touch with identified universities to confirm dates for workshops. [Find out more here](#) or direct your enquiries to swip@sadilar.org.

Companies: Organisations and prospective partners can get involved by hosting authorship workshops; sponsoring travel costs of Wikipedia trainers, venue, and catering for workshops; and featuring the project on their communication platforms, as part their company’s corporate social responsibility programmes. Contact swip@sadilar.org to get started.

*Shout-out to **FlySAA** for being one of the first companies to contribute to this project by offering discounted flights to workshop trainers in KwaZulu-Natal and Cape Town. We are very grateful.

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Interested in attending the SWiP launch?

RSVP: swip@sadilar.org

Venue: Winnie Mandela Senate Hall, UNISA's Main Campus (Muckleneuk), Pretoria,

Date: 20 September 2023

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