Our Work in South Africa

Room to Read®

80%
of students
in South Africa
have no library.

Our Presence in South Africa

Mozambique
Zimbabwe
Botswana
Limpopo
Namibia
Gauteng   Mpumalanga
Swaziland
South Africa
Lesotho

Country Information

Population	54 million
Land area	1.2 million km²
Languages of instruction	Afrikaans, IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, Sepedi, SeSotho, Setswana, Siswati, TshiVenda, Xitsonga & English
Launch of operations	2006
Room to Read office	Pretoria
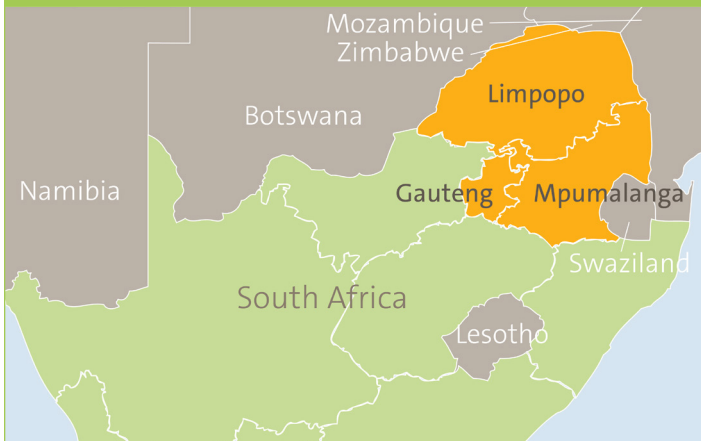
Country Overview

Despite South Africa's relative economic success, the country's apartheid era left a legacy of inequality and widespread poverty that still plagues a large portion of the country's population today. From 1948 to 1994, the white minority that controlled the country separated races and resettled hundreds of thousands of citizens.

After the revolution, President Nelson Mandela and his new government attempted to implement major social change and fuel job creation, but South Africans still struggle with a lack of opportunity, high crime rates, and more recently, the spread of HIV/AIDS. Roughly a third of South Africans today live below the poverty line.

Educational Landscape

Apartheid policies were deeply imbedded in South Africa's educational system until the revolution in 1994. There were vast differences in teacher to student ratios, school infrastructure, availability of books, and required attendance between black and white students. During the anti-apartheid struggle, a focus on liberation took precedence over education, causing learning and reading to become stigmatized.

In the first few years after the end of apartheid, the new government implemented policies to improve access to education, quality of schools, and racial equality within the education system. The Minister of Education redistributed teachers among poor-performing schools and created an outcome-based curriculum. Unfortunately, this policy did not improve the overall quality of education in South Africa, and actually caused teaching quality to suffer in many schools.

The struggle to improve the education system continues today. Only 14 percent of South Africa's black students finish high school, as compared to 65 percent of their white peers. Children are limited by poor school conditions and a lack of learning materials, especially in rural areas and very densely populated urban areas. Schools lack appropriate reading materials and 80 percent of government-run schools do not have libraries. The quality of instruction is also often insufficient, as primary school teachers tend to lack subject knowledge and pedagogical skills. Additionally, there are often a limited number of literate caregivers to help students with their schoolwork at home, which provides further challenges to supporting literacy development.

In recent years, with primary school enrollment at around 100 percent, the country's focus has shifted to improving educational quality, particularly early-grade instruction.

History and Results

Room to Read began working in South Africa in 2006. Our Literacy Program has responded to the dire need for teacher training, school libraries, and reading materials across South Africa's many official languages. We have implemented our program in the provinces of Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and Gauteng. These regions contain both rural and urban areas where we are able to have a major impact on students.

Room to Read's Literacy Program aligns with the government's goals for the education system. The Department of Basic Education has implemented various initiatives to improve literacy, including its 1,000 School Libraries Campaign. They encourage organizations including Room to Read to do similar work in underserved regions throughout South Africa.

2018 South Africa Targets

Literacy Program	
Schools supported	220
Projected children benefited	45,550
Reprinted local language titles	80

Room to Read Global Offices: San Francisco Delhi • Hong Kong • London • Mumbai New York • Sydney • Tokyo • Zurich