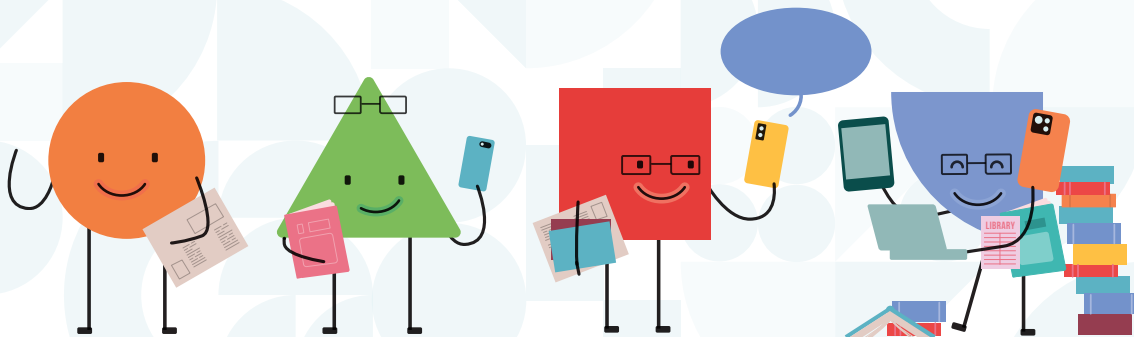


NATIONAL READING BAROMETER SOUTH AFRICA



NATIONAL READING BAROMETER SPECIAL ISSUE BRIEF: READING MATERIALS





National Reading Barometer Special Issue

Brief: Reading Materials

This brief is written for those actors who plan, fund, produce and distribute reading materials in the South African reading ecosystem. This includes actors in government, publishers, authors and self-publishers, literacy NGOs, and donors (foundations, corporate, etc.) who support reading material production and distribution.

The brief extracts insights and recommendations from the larger National Reading Barometer project. The National Reading Barometer project seeks to spark debate and enable collective decision-making around shared priorities and collaborative action in support of literacy and reading. Further information about the project, summary reports and full research reports can be found at www.readingbarometersa.org which also includes links to the open-source methods and datasets. Contact us at info@readingbarometersa.org.

Introduction

Why does it matter if people read, or if reading is able to flourish in South African society? Reading gives us power – to learn new things, tell our stories, and shape our futures. It helps build a stronger, more equal economy and a connected society. It improves educational outcomes, economic opportunities, critical thinking abilities, empathy, civic engagement, and child-adult relationships.

To improve reading in South Africa, a whole of society approach is needed. The production and use of reading materials is part of a wider reading ecosystem which includes adult reading practices, child reading skills acquisition, home literacy environments, libraries and community resources, social norms around reading, government policies and budget allocations, and digital access. This special issue brief summarises high level insights from the National Reading Barometer Project related to how adults and children currently access reading materials, their reading preferences and materials access barriers, including reflections on languages and digital reading practices.

Together with motivation, access to reading materials is the main lever for changing reading practices and reading cultures.

Reading materials access is closely tied to a country's enabling (or constraining) reading ecosystem, since it requires complex processes for resourcing, producing, and distributing materials. While a shift in reading motivation can occur in an individual through one book or article or one conversation, materials production often requires multiple institutions, significant financial investment and many months or years. Unless managed very intentionally, these processes tend to mirror socio-economic

inequalities in the country that advantage some readers over others through the content, languages, formats, pricing, and distribution channels chosen.

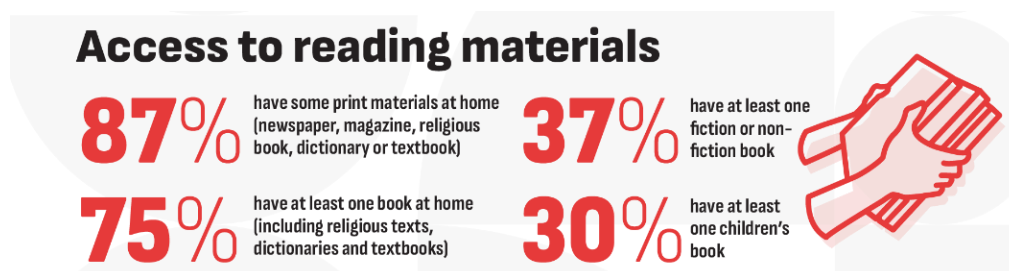
Methodology

The National Reading Barometer (NRB) project was commissioned and managed by the Nal'ibali Trust in partnership with the National Library of South Africa, with additional support from the Zenex Foundation, DGMT and the National Education Collaboration Trust. It was implemented by Social Survey Africa with Social Impact Insights Africa. The project includes two components:

The **National Reading Survey** (NRS) is a nationally representative survey (N=4251) of the adult population aged 16+. It profiles adults' reading practices, preferences, and contexts, and includes questions on reading with children, digital reading, library use and language preferences. The **National Reading Barometer** (NRB) is a new compilation of secondary datasets, plus selected data points from the NRS, that collates and tracks changes in the overall health of the South African reading ecosystem. The National Reading Survey and Barometer will be repeated in 2026 and 2030.

Reading Materials Access for Adults

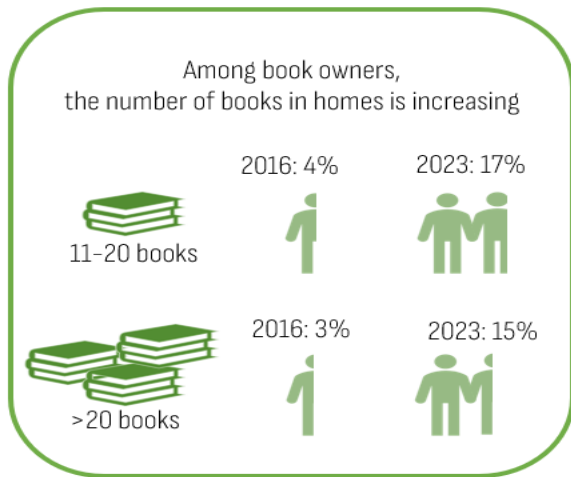
The National Reading Survey shows that adult South Africans read in many ways, including to gain information and to communicate, in addition to reading for enjoyment, and that they value reading. However, access to appropriate reading materials is a major barrier. While three-quarters of South Africans have at least one book at home (including religious books and textbooks), **only 37% have at least one fiction or non-fiction book.**



By far the most common form of reading material in the home is religious books and pamphlets (in 58% of homes), followed by newspapers (42%), dictionaries (39%), magazines (38%) and textbooks (38%).

In terms of the number of books in homes (owned or borrowed), **75% of adults have at least 1 book at home** (25% do not), including books for school, for work and religious books. This finding is not comparable with the 2016 National Reading Survey (p.81) which excluded school, work and religious books. The 2023 finding that 37% of adults have at least one fiction or non-fiction books is more comparable with the 2016 finding of 42% with 'any books', suggesting that overall, **more than half of South African adults still live in households without literature and that this is not improving over time.**

Figure 1: Books in Homes (n=4251)



The findings about larger book numbers are comparable. The percentage of households with 11-20 books increased to 17% in 2023 from 4% in 2016, and the percentage of households with more than 20 books increased from 3% to 15% in 2023. This suggests that there are two distinct challenges:

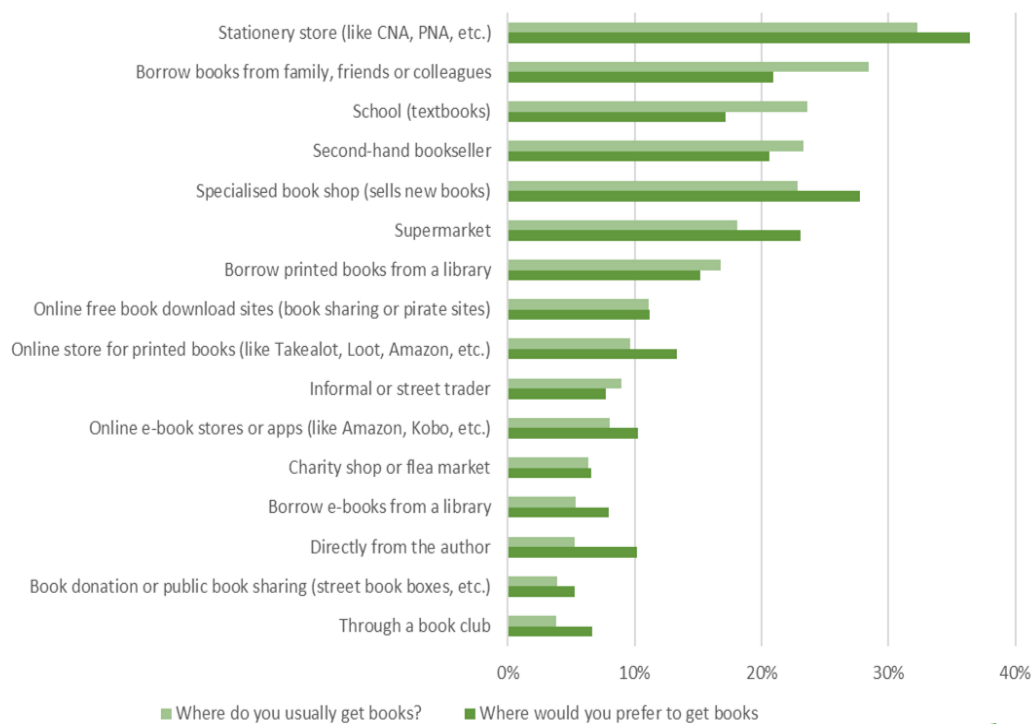
- How to get the first few books into more homes (not improving)
- How to increase the number of books in homes that already have some books (starting to improve)

There are two main avenues for increasing the volume of reading materials in homes: purchased materials and free materials (including shared, borrowed, and free-to-own materials).

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Adults' current and preferred sources of books show a combination of purchased, shared, borrowed and free-to-own books.

Figure 2: Current and Preferred Book Sources (NRS 2023, n=2852 readers of any books)



Action Points:

- Recognise the important role stationary shops, supermarkets and schools play in materials distribution and include them in strategies to increase book ownership.
- Work with and support existing social networks of book

In terms of purchased materials, stationary shops, and to a lesser extent supermarkets, play an important role in book distribution. Specialised book shops (new and second hand) are also common book sources. When asked whether they buy new or second-hand, 63% of South Africans say they never buy books. 21% buy both new and second-hand books, 10% buy only second-hand books and 7% buy only new books. In total, therefore, **28% of adults buy new books.**

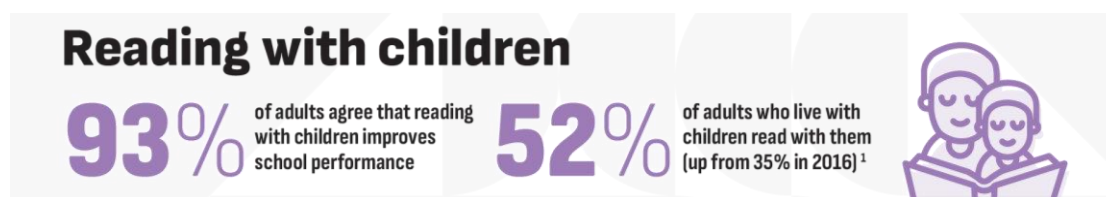
When asked what they would pay for a new book (including asking those who say they don't buy books), **the average price South Africans are willing to pay for a new book is R145.** The average price depends on household income levels. Low-income adults (under R3200 per month) would pay R138 on average, middle income (R3201-R12,800) would pay R164 and higher income (R12,800 and above) would pay R237 for a new book.

In terms of **free materials**, the NRS 2023 shows **that many readers access books by sharing among family, friends, and colleagues.** This is the second most common source of books, after purchasing books at stationary stores. **Schools are also important sources of free reading material** in the form of textbooks. Libraries are the 'usual place to get books' for only 17% of adults (out of those who ever read books). In terms of digital reading, the use of free book download sites is more common than purchases from online book sales of printed or e-books.

In South Africa, there are currently no major initiatives to produce and distribute free reading materials for adults. This is despite research findings that the presence of books in homes, and the reading practices of adults in the home, are among the strongest predictors of child reading and academic achievement. The level of interest in reading for enjoyment documented by the National Reading Survey (70% of adults read for enjoyment at least monthly), coupled with the limited number of books in homes, suggests that there is demand for such an initiative. When asked '*If there was free printed reading material being given away, where would you prefer to collect it from?*' the preferred distribution points are formal institutions, such as libraries (43%), post offices (34%) and schools (24%), rather than less formal outlets like spaza shops, petrol stations and taxi ranks. **Overall, South Africans are more interested in free printed reading materials than in free-to-download online materials.**

Reading Materials Access for Children

A positive trend is that reading with children in the home is increasing and that caregivers understand the importance of reading with children. However, too few children have children's books at home.



More people recognise the benefits of reading with children: 93% of adults who live with children (including some who do not read themselves) agree that reading at home improves school performance. In 2016, agreement with the same statements was low. In 2023, 52% of adults who live with children read with them (up from 35% in 2016). **It's not just wealthier, urban people who read with kids and who therefore have a demand for children's books: it happens across class, race, and urban-rural divides.**

Owning any number of books (not only children's books) makes people more likely to read to children, and the effect is cumulative - people with more books are most likely to read. However, many homes

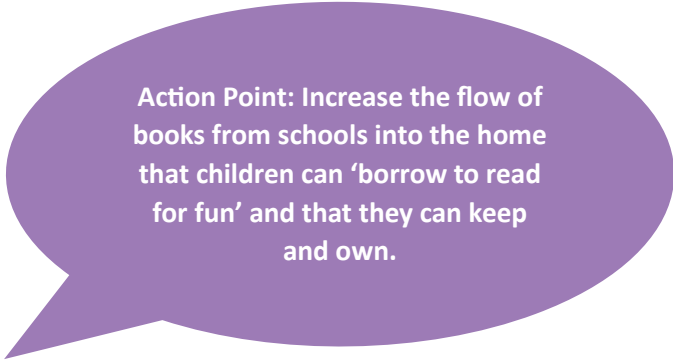
still lack access to reading materials. **65% of homes with children under age 10 do not have a single picture book**, and only 10% have more than 10 picture books. **Only 31% of adults said their oldest child owned a book by age 5.**

Of those adults who read with their young children, 84% read in English **but 59% also read in at least one African language**, mirroring the multilingual patterns of adult reading.

In terms of format, **77% of adults who live with children believe that it is important for children to read in print and not on cell phones or digital devices.** Only 5% of adults with children report using digital materials (free-to-download online materials).

For those adults who read with children, **schools are the most important source of reading materials in the home.** Half of South African households with children use school-

sourced materials (either textbooks and readers or both) when reading with their children. 13% of households rely solely on materials from school to read with children. 73% of adults say children bring textbooks and readers home from school daily or several times a week, but **only 35% say children frequently bring home books from school that they 'borrowed to read for fun'.**



Action Point: Increase the flow of books from schools into the home that children can 'borrow to read for fun' and that they can keep and own.

The production and distribution of free reading materials has been a priority of South African literacy NGOs for several years. 6,011,130 free publications for reading by and with children were distributed in 2022. This data was compiled for the NRB from seven of the largest reading materials producers in civil society: Nal'ibali, NECT, Book Dash, Free4All, African Storybooks, Room to Read and Biblionef. It does not include printed materials produced by the DBE. While this represents a large volume of printed materials, the NRB categorises this as 'emerging'. This is based on the calculation that each child should own a minimum of 20 books or printed materials by the age of 10, receiving 2 books per year. Targets assume reading material provision is not exclusively the responsibility of civil society and that civil society could contribute half of this target (1 material per child per year) with the public sector covering the other half. **Given the population of 11,2 million children aged 0-9, this means an annual civil society target of 11,2m printed materials distributed.** Currently, many civil society organisations distribute multiple materials to the same children (i.e. collections or monthly distributions) so to truly achieve every child receiving one printed material per year, this number would need to be higher.

The NRS found that 70% of adults with children have heard of at least one free print initiative and 42% have used free print materials from at least one source. Materials produced by the Department of Basic Education are best known (56% aware), followed by the Nal'ibali newspaper supplement (38% aware). Of initiatives included in the survey, only DBE and Nal'ibali resources have been used by more than 10% of adults, indicating a need to take more free print initiatives to scale.

Language Preferences

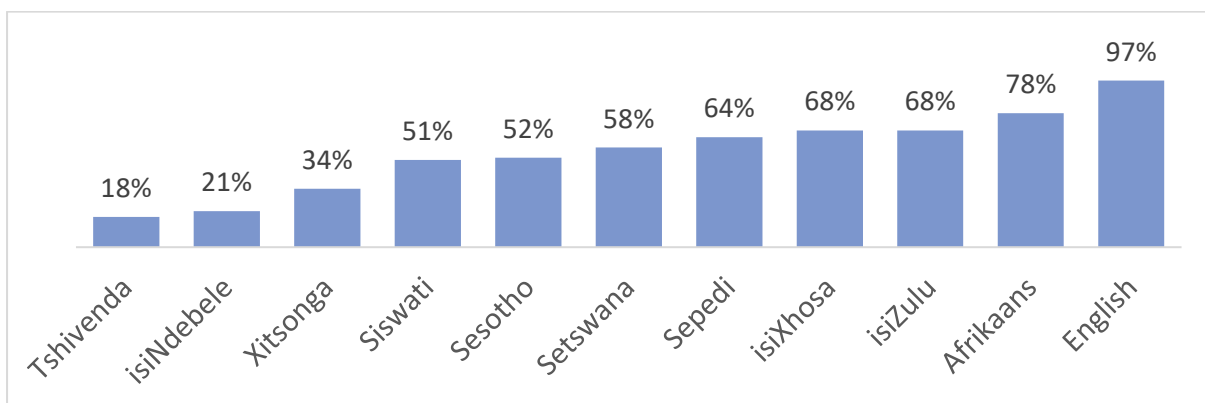
Efforts to increase access to African language¹ reading materials in recent years have focused primarily on materials for younger children. Commercial publishing remains largely in English, with a sizable Afrikaans market. This is driven by the dominance of English (and to a lesser extent Afrikaans) in the economy, and of English as a global language. **Secondary data on languages, as published by PASA and compiled in the National Reading Barometer, shows that 0,13% of books produced by the trade**

¹ In this report, African languages refers to all official South African languages apart from English and Afrikaans.

publishing arms of South African publishers are in African languages, with 3.7% of educational publishing in African languages.

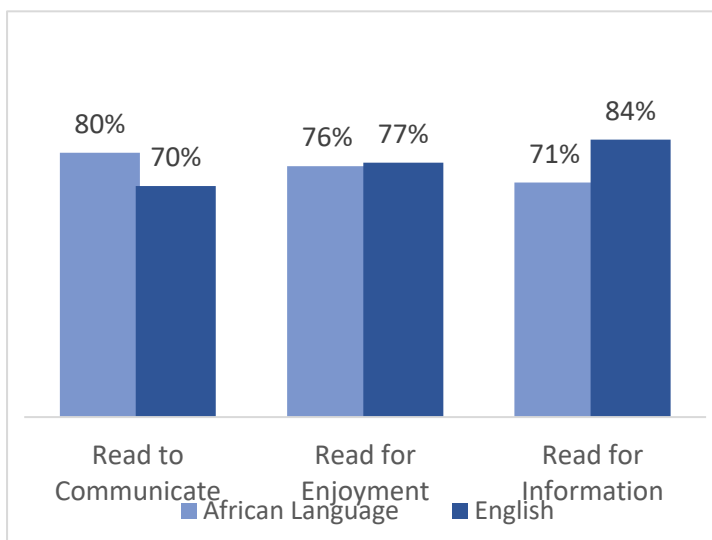
The demand for reading materials in African languages is evidenced by the number of African language speakers who have at least some books in their home language, even when so few books are being published in those languages. Figure 3 shows that 68% of adults who speak isiZulu or isiXhosa and who have any books in the home have at least a few books in their home language. This reduces to 64% and less for the Sepedi-Sesotho-Setswana language group. **But the same statistics show that the demand for materials in African languages is not being met.** In contrast, almost all home-language English speakers have books in English and 78% of home-language Afrikaans-speakers have books in Afrikaans.

Figure 3: Percent of Main Home Language speakers with books in that language (N=2850 adults with any books)



The NRS (2023) multilingual approach understands that South Africans do not so much choose between languages but choose to read in multiple languages.

Figure 4: Preferred Reading Languages of African Language Speakers (N=1948 people who read in at least one African language and read for communication, enjoyment or information)



The demand for reading in African languages is high and co-exists with reading in English. Figure 4 shows that **over 70% of adults who speak an African language at home would like to read in an African language**, including when reading for enjoyment and when reading for information (news, reference, instructions, professional/work materials, etc.). This demand is, however, largely unmet, given the lack of availability of African language publications.

More active readers tend to prefer both African languages and English, while less active readers are less likely to include English in their preferences.

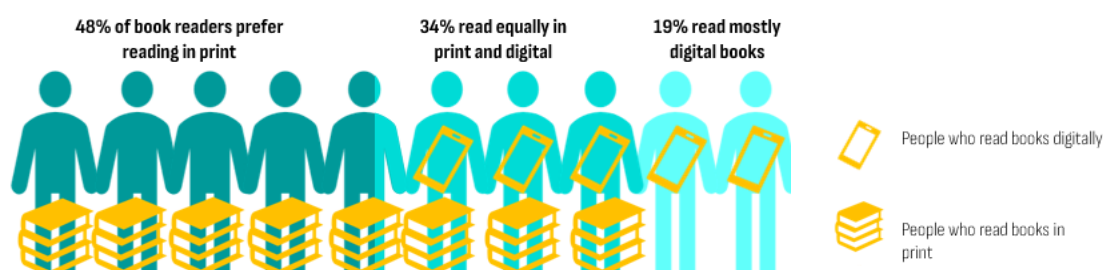
This suggests that greater availability of African-language materials may support less prolific readers to read more.

Digital Reading

Digital access is growing but remains unequally distributed. 70% of South Africans have access to the internet, which is just under the Middle-Income Countries average of 73% internet penetration. **The NRS shows that 55% of adults have ever accessed online reading materials (not including social media), which is a major increase from 2016 (7%).**

When asking readers about their preferred **book formats**, almost half mostly read print formats and a third read both print and digital. **Only 19% of adult book readers read more often in digital formats.** Considering those who only read in print and those who combine both formats, 82% read books in print at least some of the time. 53% read books digitally at least some of the time (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Book Format Preference. (N=3024 excludes those who cannot read, those who 'rarely or never read books' and those who refused to answer. Adds up to more than 100% due to rounding)

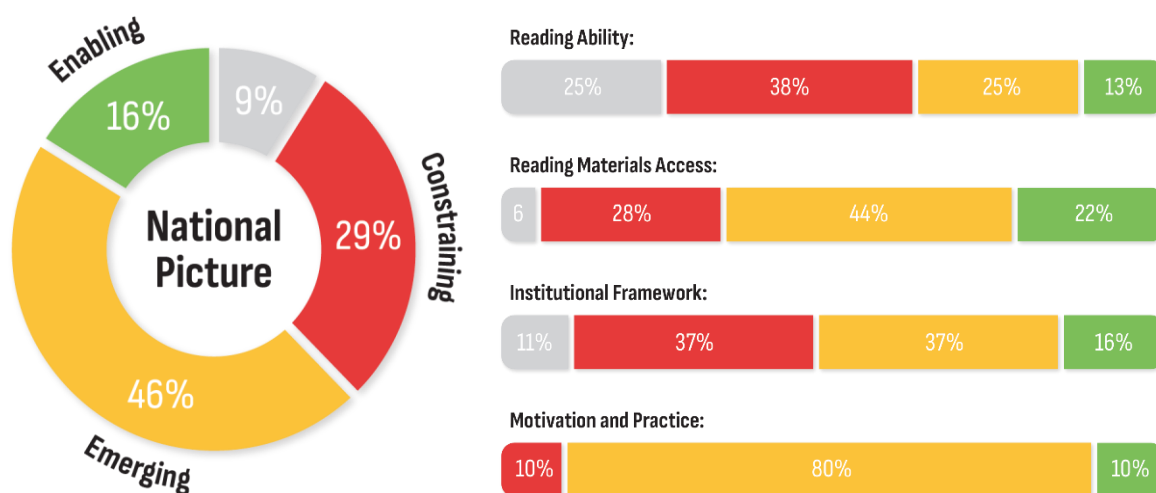


When asking about the specific types of reading materials adults use, digital book reading is increasing (35% of adults read online fiction, 30% read online non-fiction and 24% read downloaded e-books) but is still less common than print book reading. Digital book reading tends to augment rather than replace print book reading: frequent and regular e-book readers are also regular or frequent print book readers.

Action Point: Digital reading is now very widespread, especially among young people (under 35), and offers many opportunities for free reading material distribution. It should not be seen as a competitor to print reading, but it is also not a replacement for making print reading materials accessible. Reading initiatives should be explicit about how digital and print reading interact with and lead into each other to enable appropriate materials

Institutional Environment for Materials Production

Figure 6: National Reading Barometer (2023): National Ecosystem (left) and disaggregated by Dimensions (right)



An enabling environment for reading and the availability of reading materials goes beyond individual reading practices and preferences to include the institutional, policy and resourcing environment for reading. The National Reading Barometer compiles 55 data sources that reflect the wider reading ecosystem, categorising each measure as constraining (red), emerging (yellow) or enabling (green) for the ecosystem. Most measures are currently emerging (46%). The Barometer sets targets for an enabling ecosystem, allowing stakeholders across the reading and literacy sector to work together towards improving this picture.

The Barometer includes 18 measures relating to reading materials access. As shown in Figure 6 on the right, the Reading Materials Access Dimension has the highest proportion of measures which are enabling (22%) but remains mostly in the emerging category. Eight of the 18 measures relate to libraries with the rest covering the publishing industry, digital access and the number of books in homes. The survey and barometer findings relating to libraries can be found in a separate NRB Special Issues Brief on the NRB website ([Publications | National Reading Barometer South Africa \(readingbarometersa.org\)](https://publications.nrb.org.za/nrb-south-africa)), so this brief focusses on findings relating to the institutional and policy environment relating to publishing and digital access.

South Africa has a relatively enabling environment for the local production of reading materials. The formal **publishing industry** produces high volumes of materials. Publications published in South Africa in 2022, as registered with the National Library of South Africa, were 10,035 (165 per million) which compares favourably with other middle income countries of similar size. The industry is also technically skilled, diversified and commercially strong, especially for a middle-income country, with 150-200 publishers, including a range of small, niche publishers. **However, producing and distributing reading materials at all affordability levels and for all language preferences remains challenging, as described above in terms of the percentage of publications produced in African languages.**

The NRB also compiles information on a set of policies which impact on the publishing industry including:

- There is no reduction of VAT on books, like there is in some other countries, affecting affordability. Import tariffs on books are waived, increasing the affordability of imported books but making local publications less competitive.

- Public libraries are subject to generic government procurement requirements, making it difficult to quickly and flexibly acquire reading materials that are specific to the needs and interests of local communities. **There is also no consistent policy or budget for acquiring local publications in African languages, even though this might contribute to improving the language proportions in local publishing.**
- The educational publishing sector is dependent on funding and language policies within the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training. Currently, policies and resourcing of Learning and Teaching Support Materials (LTSM) are not consistent across provinces and the national LTSM policy has been stalled since 2018 given its relationship to the Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill (BELA) which remains under consultation.

As noted above, the **civil society sector** is diverse (with 62 members of the Literacy Association of South Africa and many additional literacy NGOs operating who are not members), and the sector produces high volumes of reading materials, mostly for free distribution to young children, their families and education institutions. There is capacity for the production and distribution of more materials, depending on funding. **Although education is already a funding priority for the private sector, only 4.4% of CSI funding (c. R479.6 million in 2022) is ringfenced specifically for literacy and the production and distribution of reading materials is only a small proportion of this.**

An additional systemic constraint for the availability of affordable reading materials is digital access. While 73% of South African adults have some form of internet access, which is close to the average for middle income countries, the costs of data are 26% higher than the global median cost, making access to the extensive offering of free online reading materials unaffordable for those who most need it. While many educational websites were zero-rated during the Covid-19 pandemic, **the nascent policies to enable the consistent and continued zero-rating of online educational materials have not been consistently implemented.**

Recommendations

What can materials developers do to support the national reading ecosystem?

The following recommendations are extracted from the overall recommendations of the project, focusing on actions that can be taken by actors who fund, produce, and distribute reading materials. Many of these goals and activities cannot be achieved by individual organisations or even sectors (e.g. literacy NGOs) but require partnerships and collaboration across multiple actors in the ecosystem, e.g. government providing a supportive policy environment, civil society having implementation capacity and the private sector contributing resources.

1. **Books in homes matter.** Set sector-wide targets for book ownership, for example that each child under the age of 10 should own a minimum of 20 books or printed materials. This means receiving at least 2 books per year. Run large-scale campaigns to get a few books into every home, starting from birth. Civil society organisations distributed over 6 million books in 2022, but more must be done.
2. **Book distribution through schools.** Ensure every classroom has a library; ensure children borrow books from schools; use schools as distribution channels for materials that children can take home and own; and work towards every child owning an anthology of storybooks and an anthology of graded readers.
3. **Free materials distribution channels:** Raise more awareness about where to access free and low-cost reading materials, including libraries, schools, stationery shops, supermarkets, second-hand booksellers, and digital platforms (including Nal'ibali, the African Storybook Project and Book

Dash). Initiatives should link book distribution to other child-related interventions, e.g. mother and child health programmes, child feeding schemes, ECD initiatives, etc.

4. **Adult reading matters to child reading.** The NRS showed that adults who identify as ‘readers’ and who regularly read for themselves are much more likely to read with their children. This means that free materials distribution targeting adults, and the increased production of reading materials for adults in African languages, not only contributes to South African reading cultures overall but also supports children’s literacy.
5. **Hold sector-wide discussion on the cost of books:** affordable local book production and distribution and increasing demand for books through lower costs for consumers is in the interest of the entire national reading ecosystem. Commercial publishers, self-publishers, literacy NGOs and government departments can debate cost drivers (VAT, etc.) and engage in collective advocacy and decision-making for a more enabling environment for local costs of publication.
6. **People want to read in African languages, but materials are scarce,** especially for children older than 10, teens and young adults. Expand initiatives that provide free African language reading material beyond young children to teens and adults. Include African language materials in programmes targeting less active readers. Provide more support to authors who write in African languages, including those who self-publish and sell their books directly to the public, and showcase them through awards. Increase accessibility of free and low-cost print reading materials in African languages at people’s preferred pickup points - libraries, post offices, schools, supermarkets/retail stores and clinics.
7. **Digital materials are useful but not always appropriate:** Recognise that less active readers and most parents prefer print; in reading campaigns, use appropriate materials for the target audience and age group. Nonetheless, advocacy to increase the zero-rating of educational websites and online reading materials is important, as is general advocacy concerning the costs of data.
8. **Work with libraries:** The NRS shows that library users are very satisfied with their libraries, making libraries a highly effective public service. But they are under-resourced. Literacy actors can work with their local library, seeing it not only as a source of free reading material to borrow, but also as a distribution channel for free reading materials to own and keep. Literacy initiatives can increase their impact and sustainability by working with libraries and assisting with technology, materials acquisition, volunteers, and funding for community outreach programmes.
9. **Leverage library procurement processes:** engage in multi-sector dialogues and advocacy to identify and address barriers to leveraging library procurement processes and budgets to support local publishing, especially in African languages.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A steering committee shaped the project’s direction and strategy and provided governance and oversight. Its members represented basic education, libraries, literacy non-profits, academia, philanthropy, publishing and community activism, and included: Bafana Mtini (Khutsong Literacy Club), Catherine Langsford/Nadeema Musthan (Litasa), Dorothy Dyer (FunDza), Heleen Hofmeyr (RESEP), Janita Low (independent), Kentse Radebe (DGMT), Kulula Manona (DBE), Lauren Fok (Zenex Foundation), Lorraine Marneweck (NECT), Nazeem Hardy (Liasa), Nokuthula Musa (NLSA), Nqabakazi

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