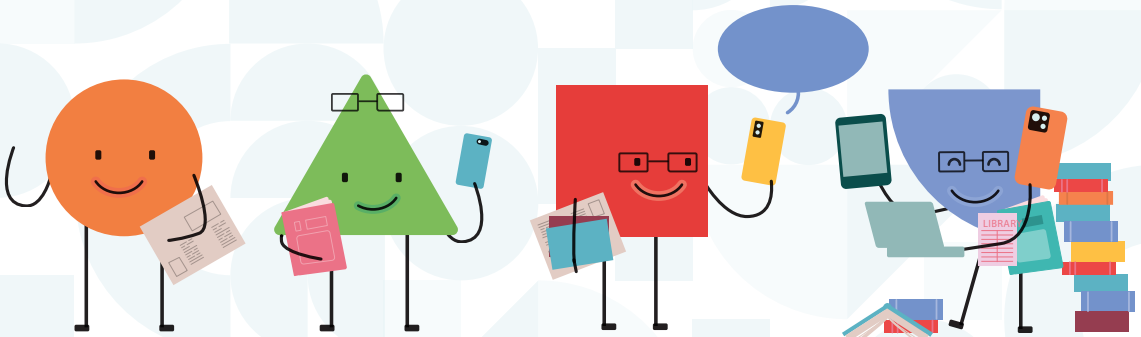


NATIONAL READING BAROMETER SOUTH AFRICA

SUMMARY REPORT 2023





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BACKGROUND

The National Reading Barometer project describes adult reading culture and the broader reading ecosystem in South Africa. The project includes two components:

The **National Reading Survey (NRS)** is a nationally representative survey 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 Survey was designed to enable limited continuity with the 2016 National Reading Survey run by the South African Book Development Council (SABDC).

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.

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RATIONALE

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.

Yet this power and payoff remains out of reach for many. South Africa's 2021 PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) results showed that 81% of Grade 4 children cannot read for meaning in any language. The 2023 National Reading Survey found that nearly 3 in 5 homes do not have a single fiction or nonfiction book.

To improve reading in South Africa, a whole of society approach is needed. Adult reading practices, home literacy environments, libraries and community resources, social norms around reading, policies and budget allocations, publishing industry activities and accessible data impact reading – and supporting its growth starts with up-to-date information.

By drawing together new research and existing data, this project seeks to spark debate and enable collective decision-making around shared priorities and collaborative action.

OBJECTIVES

The project's goals are to:

Understand reading

cultures: describe the diverse reading practices of South African adults.

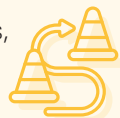


Understand reading motivation and attitudes:

understand why people do or don't read and how they feel about reading.



Understand access: map access to reading materials, by type and language, and unpack barriers to access.



Understand the ecosystem:

map reading ability, policies, budgets and system capacities that enable or constrain the growth of reading.



Track change over time:

track changes since the 2016 National Reading Survey, and when the Survey and Barometer are repeated in 2026 and 2030.



Inform research, policy and practice:

inform and inspire research on reading in South Africa; policy shifts that create a more enabling context for reading; and interventions to promote and strengthen reading.



Theory of Change

To define the survey focus areas and the Barometer dimensions, the project steering committee developed a theory of change. The graphic below shows the project's understanding of how reading cultures develop, deepen and flourish.



Ability

If South Africans can functionally read.

+



Access

If relevant reading materials are easily accessible, in appropriate formats and languages.

+



Motivation

If adults are motivated to read, and to read with children, and the benefits of reading are shared by other adults, leaders and influencers such as media, role models.

=

Reading Cultures

People read regularly for enjoyment, for information and communication.

virtuous cycle

Reading ability improves

Increased reading capability further fuels the growth of reading cultures



Access & motivation increase

More people will get access to reading material to meet their growing love and pleasure for reading



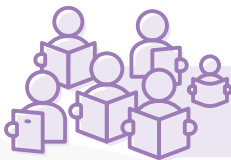
Supply grows

Demand for literature will rise and stakeholders will create an enabling environment for affordable, multi-lingual, appropriate literature to be made available through various access points.



Demand grows

As reading is normalised and reading behaviour is widespread in society and as people derive more pleasure from reading and see the benefits of reading.



Reading increases

As reading is normalised and reading behaviour is widespread in society and as people derive more pleasure from reading and see the benefits of reading.

2023 National Reading Survey

KEY FINDINGS:



ACCESS TO READING MATERIALS

Among book owners, the number of books at home is increasing, but 63% of households still do not have a single fiction or nonfiction book.

The percentage of adults who live in a home with 11–20 books has increased from 4% in 2016 to 17%, and the percentage with more than 20 books has increased from 3% to 15%.

People usually get books from stationery stores, borrowing from friends and family, schools, second-hand booksellers and specialised book shops, followed by supermarkets and libraries.

Although 87% of people have some print materials at home, including religious books, newspapers, magazines, dictionaries and textbooks, more than 3 in 5 people **(63%) still do not have any fiction or nonfiction books at home**. This is similar to the 2016 finding that 58% of homes had no books. This suggests that once people own some books they tend to accumulate more, but little progress has been made in shifting non-book owners to book owners.

METHOD

The National Reading Survey is a nationally representative survey of 4,250 South African adults aged 16 and above. The data was collected in late 2022 and early 2023. Participants were recruited through face-to-face stratified sampling and interviewed by phone or face-to-face. Survey results were weighted by age, race and province for analysis.

The survey included questions on reading practices, reading motivation and identity, access to reading materials, reading with children, digital reading, language preferences, libraries and demographics.

The questionnaire and final dataset are available at www.readingbarometersa.org, along with a technical report on the survey and analysis methodology.





READING WITH CHILDREN

More adults are reading with children, and most adults believe it is important, but they do not have enough children's books.

In 2023, **52% of adults who live with children read with them (up from 35% in 2016)**. About three-quarters of these (73%) do so at least two or three times a week.

It's not just wealthier, urban people who read with kids: 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.

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 improves school performance. In 2016, agreement with the same statements was low.

65% of homes with children under age 10 do not have a single picture book,

However, action lags behind awareness – and 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 the age of 5. This means most South African children arrive at school without important early home learning experiences.

The biggest barrier to reading with children is lack of time, according to both adults who read with children (82% would read more if they had more time) and those who don't (47% don't read because they lack time). More than three-quarters of adults who read with children would also read more if they felt more confident as readers; and if they had more interesting, free, relatable reading material in preferred languages.



DIGITAL READING

Digital reading has grown significantly, although access remains unequal, and many readers still prefer paper.

55% of adults read online materials, up from 7% in 2016. (This excludes social media.) Online news, magazines and religious materials are most popular. A quarter of adults have read an ebook, and 20% own at least one (up from 11% in 2016).

Digital reading predominantly happens on small screens. 84% of internet users use a smartphone; just 7% use computers and 1% use tablets.

Despite popular perceptions that social media use detracts from “real reading,” this study found that they tend to occur together. People who spend 11–20 hours a week on social media are also more than twice as likely to read long texts regularly. But access challenges remain. 27% of adults do not have internet access, and another 18% say their access is not reliable. People without internet access are more likely to be over age 50, rural, less educated (incomplete secondary or less), and have lower household incomes.

And despite digital reading’s growth, print remains popular. **Almost half of book readers still prefer print (48%),** while 1 in 5 prefer digital books (the rest enjoy both formats). People who read less frequently overwhelmingly prefer print materials, though young people are more likely to read digitally. **And caregivers still want print: only 5% of adults who live with children read digital materials with them.**



LANGUAGES

South Africans are multilingual readers. People want to read in African languages, especially less active readers, but not enough texts are available.

This report uses “African languages” to refer to the nine national languages excluding Afrikaans and English. Most African language speakers are multilingual readers, who enjoy reading in both African languages and English.

Demand for reading in African languages is high. Overall, **76% of African language speakers who read for enjoyment want to read in African languages.** More active readers tend to prefer both African languages and English, while

less active readers are less likely to prefer English. This suggests that African-language materials may support less prolific readers to read more.

Access to African language materials, for adults and children, still lags behind English and Afrikaans, and is unequal across languages. Of people who have any books at home, 97% of people who mainly speak English have at least one book in English, and 78% of Afrikaans speakers have a book in Afrikaans. This drops to 68% for isiXhosa and isiZulu speakers, 64% for Sepedi, 56% for Setswana, 52% for Sesotho and 51% for Setswana speakers. (Sample sizes for isiNdebele, Tshivenda and Xitsonga were too small to draw reliable conclusions, but these numbers were significantly lower.) The same trend is echoed in children’s books, with similar percentages.



LIBRARIES

Libraries remain important places for reading, but are still not accessible to all, and many users don’t borrow books.

58% of adults have access to a community library, but this is highly unequal by province, ranging from 86% in the Western Cape to 20% in the Eastern Cape. Those who need libraries most – people with less income, less education and in rural areas – have the least access.

Despite Covid-era closures, libraries seem to have “bounced back”: **28% of South African adults have visited a community library in the last year** (27% in 2016), and 19% use a library once a month or more. Students and residents of small towns are most likely to use libraries regularly.

17% of adults use community libraries to read, but only **8% borrow books** (7% in 2016). People who use libraries for reading (rather than just meetings or internet access) are more likely to live in small towns, own books (especially those who own fewer than 20 books), have a monthly household income below R12 800, like to talk about reading with friends and family, and self-identify as an occasional, regular or passionate reader.

Among book readers, the percentage of people who usually get books from libraries has declined sharply in recent decades: from 48% in 2006 to 24% in 2016 to 17% in 2023. However, libraries are the top preferred location for people to pick up free reading materials to keep and own (43% of adults).

Three in four community library users are happy with the library as it is, and 9% are concerned about external factors (such as the distance from home or the cost of transport). For those who do not use libraries, disinterest in reading and transport costs are the main barriers.

Numbers at a glance

Access to reading materials

87% have some print materials at home (newspaper, magazine, religious book, dictionary or textbook)

37% have at least one fiction or non-fiction book

75% have at least one book at home (including religious texts, dictionaries and textbooks)

30% have at least one children's book



25% have no books

43% have 1-10 books

17% have 11-20 books

7% have 21-30 books

8% have more than 30 books

Reading practices

83% read for any reason, including for enjoyment, information or communication

32% read books more than once a week

78% read for enjoyment



Motivation and identity

Adults who self-identify as readers read more
Positive attitudes towards reading have increased since 2016



Reading with children

93% of adults agree that reading with children improves school performance

52% of adults who live with children read with them (up from 35% in 2016)¹



What do they read?

40% text books

33% fiction stories

29% readers from school

28% religious stories



35% of homes with children under 10 have at least one picture book

10% have more than 10 picture books

31% of adults said their child owned a book by the age of 5

5% of adults use digital materials to read with children



What would help people read with children more?

- More time
- More interesting, free, relatable material in preferred languages
- More confidence

¹ National survey into the reading and book reading behaviour of adult South Africans (2016). South African Book Development Council.

The 2023 National Reading Survey (NRS) is a nationally representative survey that describes access to reading materials, attitudes towards reading, reading practices and barriers to reading in South Africa. 4,250 adults ages 16+ were recruited through face-to-face stratified sampling and interviewed by phone or in person. Results were weighted by age, race and province.



Digital reading

55% of adults read online materials, excluding social media (up from 7% in 2016)¹

24% of adults have read an ebook



i Most popular: online news, magazines and blogs, religious material

i Less active readers prefer print
Young people are more likely to read digitally

Book readers prefer:



47% print



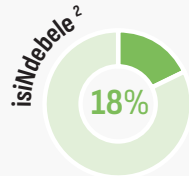
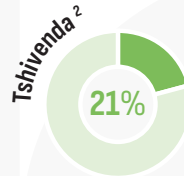
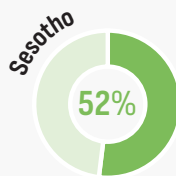
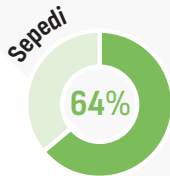
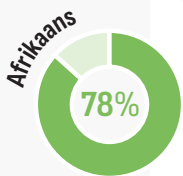
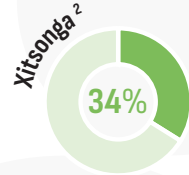
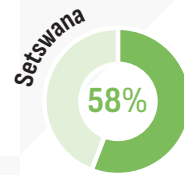
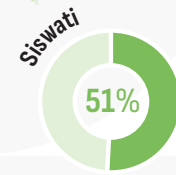
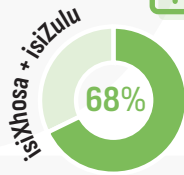
19% digital



34% both

Languages

percentage of speakers with at least one book at home in that language:



Libraries

58% of adults have access to a community library

28% visited a library in the last year

19% visit at least once a month

17% use libraries to read



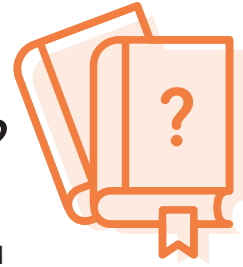
i People with and without children use libraries at the same rate

8% borrow books

²: Sample sizes in Xitsonga, Tshivenda and isiNdebele were not large enough to be representative

Reading cultures:

How do South Africans read?



There is not one right way to read: people read for different reasons and in different ways. The project defines a reading culture as a set of beliefs, social practices, and material cultures related to reading that are shaped by how people perceive their environment and make choices in response to it. It also recognises that multiple reading cultures exist in our highly unequal and diverse context.

To understand South Africa's diverse reading cultures, the survey asked about three distinct reasons people read – for enjoyment (entertainment or relaxation), for information (to gather information – e.g. newspapers, work, study), and for communication (letters, SMS/chat, social media, email). It asked about a wide variety of materials, including religious texts, digital materials and social media, and explored language choices and preferences.

We built six multi-indicator indices to analyse key dimensions of reading:

1

Purpose of reading

(Enjoyment, information or communication),

2

Habits

(Frequency)

3

Volume

(Amount of time)

4

Depth

(Length & complexity)

5

Motivation & identity

6

Materials access

(Types, formats & access channels).

Reading for enjoyment, reading frequently, and reading books and long texts (whether print or digital) bring deeper advantages to the reader and society, and so we weighted these reading activities more heavily in the indices than reading short texts or reading to communicate.

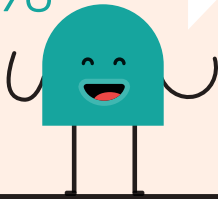
When we analysed and clustered the data along these indices, five distinct reading cultures emerged, which we have represented as "Reader Personas." Although structural inequality affects access to reading materials and libraries, **each Persona that emerged from the data included people from across South Africa's diverse and unequal society.**

The Personas can help people working in reading promotion to understand different audiences – beyond traditional markers such as class, education, employment status or location – and develop targeted messaging and strategies to encourage more reading within each of these groups.

Nonreaders

18% of SA pop.

"Reading is valuable, but it's not for me"



Key characteristics:

Little print material at home.
Little internet or smartphone use. Older, not economically active, less educated.

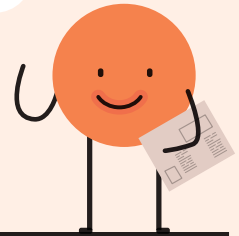
Targeted messaging:

Find opportunities to tell and listen to stories; motivate young people to read.

Functional readers

17% of SA population

"I read when I have to"



Key characteristics:

Use mobile phones to communicate and get information they need; minimal social media use. May have religious books, but little else. Prefer paper.

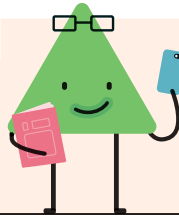
Targeted messaging:

Believe that you are a reader and value the reading you are already doing; find a topic or author that excites you.

Occasional readers

23% of SA population

"I read but it's not a big part of my life"



Key characteristics:

Read fiction, non-fiction, news and magazines, but low volume. Own <10 books. Rarely read long texts. Have internet access but prefer paper.

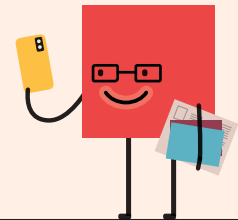
Targeted messaging:

Find a topic or an author that excites you; make reading more of a habit.

Regular readers

26% of SA population

"I read to stay connected and know what's happening"



Key characteristics:

Read frequently. Own >10 books. Use social media. Read online, but half prefer paper. Visit libraries regularly. Read long texts less frequently.

Targeted messaging:

Share your favourite reads with others; try longer texts.

Committed readers

17% of SA population

"I love reading and it's part of my everyday life"



Key characteristics:

Read daily at high-volume. Own >10 books (print and ebooks); read paper and digital equally. Get books from libraries. Read long texts often.

Targeted messaging:

Share your favourite reads with others; influence people in your social circles to read.

2023 National Reading Barometer

The National Reading Barometer maps the health of the South African reading ecosystem. It brings together findings from the 2023 National Reading Survey and published secondary data, including data on both adult and child reading, to provide a holistic view of what enables and constrains reading in South Africa.

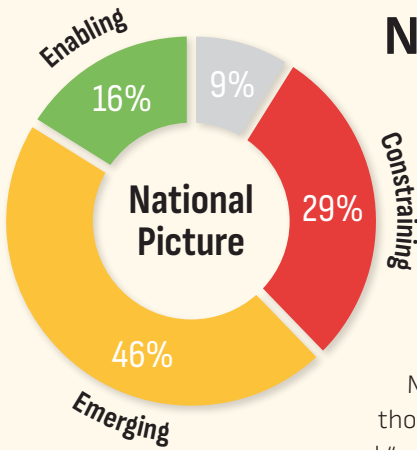
The Barometer assesses four dimensions of the reading ecosystem:

- 1. Reading Ability:** early literacy, primary school reading outcomes, youth literacy and adult literacy levels.
- 2. Reading Materials Access:** book ownership, access through libraries, the publishing industry, free reading material distribution and digital access.
- 3. Institutional Framework:** the policy environment, investment in reading (government budgets and private sector funding), and the education system's capacity to teach reading.
- 4. Reading Motivation and Practice:** the degree to which adults self-identify as readers, regularly read for enjoyment and information, regularly read books and regularly read with children.

In total, the Barometer is composed of 55 measures. Each measure's current status is assessed against a target or standard and coded as "enabling" (green), "emerging" (amber) or "constraining" (red). Cutoff points are based on existing sector targets; international comparison to other low- or middle-income countries (LMICs); equity considerations; and consultation with data owners. Where data is missing, out of date or not yet available, a measure is captured as grey. This results in an aggregated assessment for each dimension and for the full South African reading ecosystem, as well as recommendations to improve data collection.

A full description of data sources and cutoff points is available at www.readingbarometersa.org.

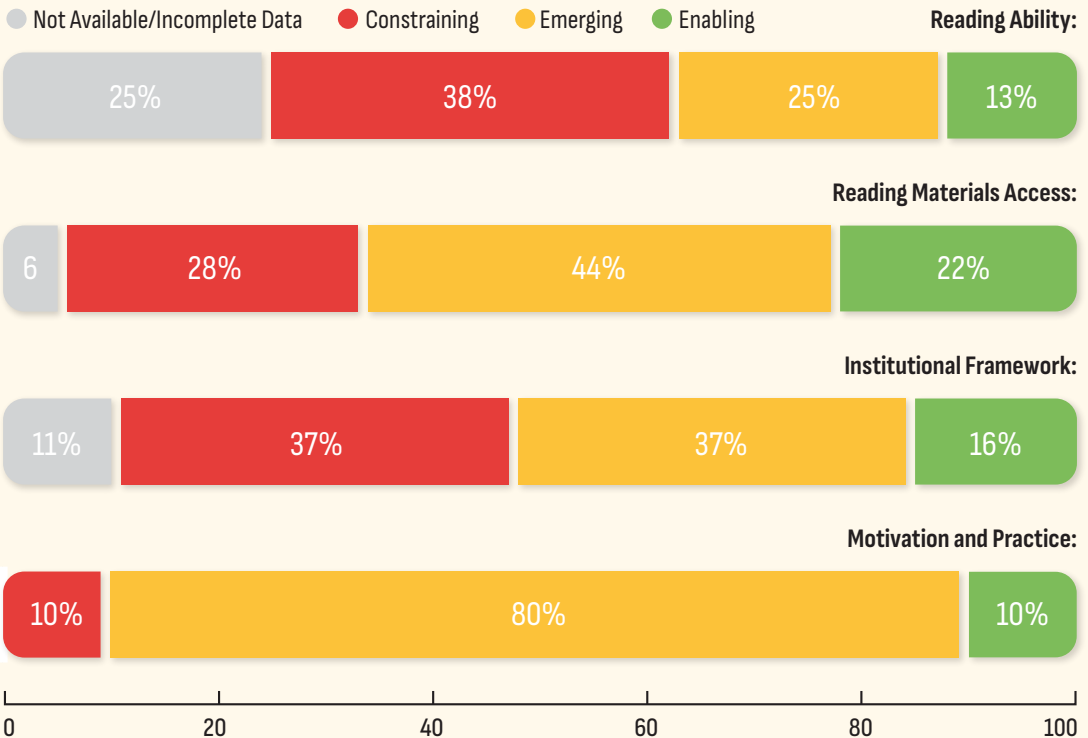
NATIONAL PICTURE



Considering all 55 measures of the National Reading Barometer, the South African reading ecosystem is predominantly “emerging” (46% of measures), and “constraining” (29% of measures), although 16% of measures are “enabling.” (see Left).

When considering the four dimensions of the ecosystem, Motivation and Practice is predominantly “emerging”, even though the other dimensions also have a spread of “enabling” and “constraining” measures. This suggests that South Africans’ reading choices are somewhat resilient to “constraining” conditions (people who wish to read will do so, even if it is difficult), but that a more “enabling” environment across Reading Ability, Reading Materials Access and Institutional Framework would support more widespread reading.

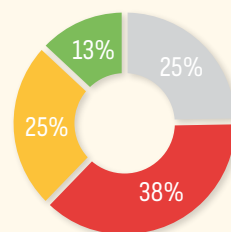
Ability, Access, Institutional Framework and Motivation and Practice



BAROMETER MEASURES

READING ABILITY

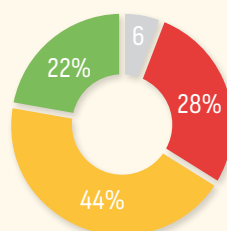
South Africa has unequal early learning outcomes and extremely poor primary school literacy, but reaches acceptable levels of basic youth and adult literacy by international comparison.



| # | INDICATOR | DATA SOURCE | YEAR | PERFORMANCE | RATING |
|-----|---|----------------------|------|-----------------|-------------------|
| RA1 | % of children 'on track' for early literacy at age 4/5 who attend an early learning programme | Thrive by Five Index | 2021 | 55% | Constraining |
| RA2 | Percentage points gap between Quintile 5 and Quintile 1&2 children 'on track' for early literacy at age 4/5 | Thrive by Five Index | 2021 | 17% | Emerging |
| RA3 | % of Foundation Phase learners meeting DBE reading literacy benchmarks | FUNS | n/a | n/a | Not yet available |
| RA4 | Degree of inequality in learners meeting DBE reading literacy benchmarks | FUNS | n/a | n/a | Not yet available |
| RA5 | % of Grade 4 learners who can read for meaning (and average PIRLS score) | PIRLS | 2021 | 19% (score 288) | Constraining |
| RA6 | Change in % of Grade 4 learners who can read for meaning (and average PIRLS score) | PIRLS | 2021 | -3% (score -32) | Constraining |
| RA7 | % of youth ages 15-24 who are functionally literate | World Bank | 2019 | 98% | Enabling |
| RA8 | % of adults ages 15+ who are functionally literate | World Bank | 2019 | 95% | Emerging |

READING MATERIALS ACCESS

Libraries are an effective but under-resourced public service. The formal publishing industry produces high volumes of materials and is technically skilled, diversified and commercially strong, especially for a middle-income country, but producing and distributing reading materials at all affordability levels and for all language preferences remains challenging. Digital access is growing but remains unequally distributed. Most households still do not have any fiction, nonfiction or children's books, and few have more than 20 books (though this number is growing).



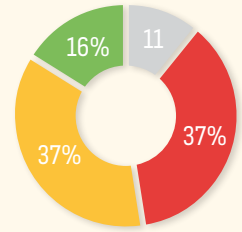
| # | INDICATOR | DATA SOURCE | YEAR | PERFORMANCE | RATING |
|------|---|--------------------------------------|--------|--------------------------------|---------------|
| RM1 | Libraries per population: national ratio | NLSA | 2022 | 1 : 31,000 | Emerging |
| RM2 | Libraries per population: number of provinces meeting target ratio | NLSA | 2022 | 4 | Constraining |
| RM3 | Libraries budget as % of draft library Norms & Standards requirements | DSAC budget report + CLSG evaluation | 2022/3 | 58% | Constraining |
| RM4 | Number of new materials procured by public libraries (and as % of target) | DSAC CLSG evaluation | 2022 | 276,031 (95%) | Enabling |
| RM5 | Number of librarians (and average # per library) | DSAC budget report + CLSG evaluation | 2022/3 | 2563 (1.3 per library) | Constraining |
| RM6 | % of adults who have used a library in the past year | NRS | 2023 | 28% | Emerging |
| RM7 | % of library users satisfied with library services | NRS | 2023 | 75% | Enabling |
| RM8 | % of Public Ordinary Operational Schools with stocked libraries and/or classroom libraries | SMS | 2022 | n/a | Not available |
| RM9 | Number of publishers in South Africa | PASA Survey | 2022 | 150-200 | Enabling |
| RM10 | % of educational titles (print and digital) published in African languages | PASA Survey | 2022 | 3.70% | Emerging |
| RM11 | % of trade publishing revenue from books (print and digital) published in African languages | PASA Survey | 2022 | 0.13% | Constraining |
| RM12 | Number of non-serial items deposited with National Library of South Africa | NLSA Annual Report | 2022 | 10035 (165 per million) | Enabling |
| RM13 | Number of free printed reading materials for children produced and distributed by civil society | Compiled for NRB | 2023 | >6,011,130 (0.54 per child <1) | Emerging |
| RM14 | % of adults who live with children that have used free printed reading materials | NRS | 2023 | 42% | Emerging |
| RM15 | % of adult population with internet access | World Bank | 2020 | 70% | Emerging |
| RM16 | Cost of 1GB of data in relation to global median | cable.co.uk | 2022 | 26% above global median | Constraining |
| RM17 | % of households with any fiction or nonfiction print books | NRS | 2022 | 37% | Emerging |
| RM18 | % of households with children <10 with any children's books | NRS | 2022 | 35% | Emerging |

● Not Available/Incomplete Data ● Constraining ● Emerging ● Enabling

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

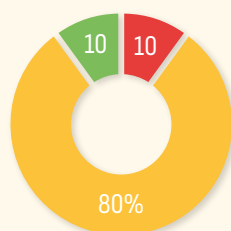
This project highlight areas where reading in South Africa is moving in a positive direction, and areas where more effort and attention is needed. Key recommendations are outlined below.

To make progress in these areas, collaboration is critical. Government, business, civil society, publishing, researchers and activists need to agree on priorities, goals and action plans to create a society where reading can flourish..



| # | INDICATOR | DATA SOURCE | YEAR | PERFORMANCE | RATING |
|------|--|----------------------------|------|---|-------------------|
| IF1 | National DBE has policy framework and capacity to hold provinces accountable for reading literacy policy directives and budget use | DBE qualitative assessment | 2023 | Policy framework and capacity insufficient | Emerging |
| IF2 | Provincial DoEs and Treasuries allocate and use budgets in line with policy directives that prioritise reading literacy | DBE qualitative assessment | 2023 | Inconsistent allocation, use and reporting | Not yet available |
| IF3 | Provincial LTSM budgets are clearly ringfenced and fully utilised | Treasury data | 2023 | Difficult to isolate LTSM budget/ spend in most provinces | Not yet available |
| IF4 | Total value and % of CSI funding spent on literacy | Triologue | 2022 | ~R479.6m (4.4% of CSI funding) | Emerging |
| IF5 | LTSM policy is adopted and implemented | DBE | 2023 | Draft done 2018, waiting for passage of BELA | Constraining |
| IF6 | Benchmarks for reading fluency are established in all languages | DBE | 2023 | Benchmarks launched, FUNS assessments initiated | Enabling |
| IF7 | National standardised assessments to monitor reading ability developed and implemented | DBE | 2023 | Thrive by 5, ELNA, FUNS and Systemic Evaluations launched | Enabling |
| IF8 | Inclusive education policy is in place and implemented | DBE | 2023 | In place, but under-resourced and ineffective | Emerging |
| IF9 | National Reading Plan is developed, regularly monitored and reported on | DBE | 2023 | MTSF in place, revised plan under development | Emerging |
| IF10 | Zero-rating policy for educational websites is in place and implemented | DCDT, DGMT | 2023 | In place, but no implementation mechanism | Emerging |
| IF11 | Language in Education Policy is in place and implemented | DBE | 2023 | In place, but inconsistent implementation | Emerging |
| IF12 | Library and Information Services Bill is passed | DSAC | 2023 | Draft done 2018, stalled in consultation | Constraining |

| | | | | | |
|------|---|--------|------|------------------------------------|--------------|
| IF13 | Libraries Norms and Standards are in place and being progressively realised | DSAC | 2023 | Draft done 2013; never passed | Constraining |
| IF14 | Library procurement processes enable flexible and timeous procurement | DSAC | 2023 | Bound by generic procurement rules | Constraining |
| IF15 | VAT is not charged on books | SARS | 2023 | Books are not VAT-exempt | Constraining |
| IF16 | Imported books do not carry tariffs | SARS | 2023 | No tariffs | Enabling |
| IF17 | Quality of initial teacher education programmes for teaching reading in African languages | CoPAL | 2022 | Insufficient | Constraining |
| IF18 | Ratio of new teachers to projected teacher demand | RESEP | 2022 | 69% | Constraining |
| IF19 | Number of institutional Litasa members | Litasa | 2023 | 62 | Emerging |



READING MOTIVATION AND PRACTICE

Overall, reading culture is best characterised as emerging. Agreement with positive statements about reading is high, and more adults are reading with children than in 2016, but only around a third of adults identify strongly as a reader or read books frequently.

| # | INDICATOR | DATA SOURCE | YEAR | PERFORMANCE | RATING |
|------|--|-------------|------|-------------|--------------|
| MP1 | % of adults with a strong 'reader' identity | NRS | 2023 | 35% | Emerging |
| MP2 | % of adults who frequently read for enjoyment | NRS | 2023 | 48% | Emerging |
| MP3 | % of adults who frequently read for information | NRS | 2023 | 53% | Emerging |
| MP4 | % of youth who frequently read for enjoyment | NRS | 2023 | 52% | Emerging |
| MP5 | % of youth who frequently read for information | NRS | 2023 | 59% | Emerging |
| MP6 | % of adults who frequently read fiction or nonfiction books (paper or digital) | NRS | 2023 | 32% | Constraining |
| MP7 | % of adults who read digital materials (excluding social media) | NRS | 2023 | 55% | Emerging |
| MP8 | % of adults living with children who read to them | NRS | 2023 | 52% | Emerging |
| MP9 | % of adults living with children who read to them before they can talk | NRS | 2023 | 35% | Emerging |
| MP10 | % of adults who agree that reading with children at home is valuable for their schooling | NRS | 2023 | 93% | Enabling |

Recommendations

This project highlights areas where reading in South Africa is moving in a positive direction, and areas where more effort and attention is needed. Key recommendations are outlined below.

To make progress in these areas, collaboration is critical. Government, business, civil society, publishing, researchers and activists need to agree on priorities, goals and action plans to create a society where reading can flourish.

ACCESS TO READING MATERIALS



- Run large-scale campaigns to get a few books into every home.
- Ensure every classroom has a library; ensure children borrow books from schools; and work towards every child owning an anthology of storybooks and an anthology of graded readers.
- 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.
- Release libraries from generic government procurement systems so they can acquire new reading materials quickly and in response to user interests.

READING WITH CHILDREN



In addition to increasing access to children's books as noted above:

- Continue promoting reading with children, and introduce more nuanced messaging that:
 - Focuses on building caregivers' confidence (any amount is good; give it a go; don't worry about doing it right);
 - Focuses on starting early, before children can talk or read themselves;
 - Raises more awareness about where to access free and low-cost reading materials, including libraries, schools, stationery shops, supermarkets, secondhand booksellers, and digital platforms (including Nal'ibali, the African Storybook Project and Book Dash).



DIGITAL READING

- Reduce barriers to internet access to enable more reading.
- Shift the narrative: using social media and reading for enjoyment are not a zero-sum game. Use social media, like Facebook and TikTok, to draw people into other types of reading.
- Recognise that less active readers and most parents prefer print; in reading campaigns, use appropriate materials for the target audience and age group.



LANGUAGES

In addition to increasing access to free and low-cost materials and enabling more effective library procurement as noted above:

- 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.
- Include African language materials in programmes targeting less active readers.
- Expand initiatives that provide free African language reading material beyond young children to teens and adults.



LIBRARIES

- Continue to increase accessibility and promote libraries in communities.
- Raise more awareness about libraries' digital services, such as checking out ebooks.
- Develop strategies to retain young library users as they grow older.
- Make it easier and more enticing for library users to borrow books – for example, by streamlining sign-up requirements, running campaigns and removing late fines.
- Collaborate with campaigns that give away free reading materials on a large scale, such as the Nal'ibali campaign, Book Dash and others, to distribute via libraries.

POLICIES

- Re-prioritise and unblock stalled policy processes, including Norms and Standards for Libraries and the Public Library and Information Services Bill; and complete and fund the National Reading Policy currently under development.
- Develop distinct measures for policy adoption and quality of implementation and improve mechanisms to facilitate and monitor policy implementation.



DATA

- Consolidate existing data on publishing and libraries so that budgets, service levels, and spatial and language distribution of materials can be seen and tracked more accurately.
- As a literacy sector, set clearer targets for desirable reading ecosystem outcomes and clarify collective pathways to achieving those targets.



FURTHER RESEARCH

- Investigate the relationship between demographics, socio-economic status and reading practices in more detail. Preliminary analysis found that these relationships were not as strong as anticipated and that factors like reader identity and access to books were more strongly predictive of reading behaviours - but this needs to be explored in more detail.
- Investigate teen reading practices to understand the degree to which parents' perceptions of these are accurate, the role of digital reading, and interaction between social media and longer-form reading.
- Interrogate the relationship between poor literacy skills in Grade 4 yet high levels of reported reading activity by older teens.
- Explore whether owning just a few books is a catalyst that further increases book ownership and reading practices over time.
- Gauge demand for African language materials among specific audiences and for different types of reading material.



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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit www.readingbarometersa.org to access the following:

- The full dataset and questionnaire
- A technical report on survey methodology and analysis
- "What kind of a reader are you?" quiz
- Special issue briefs on reading with children, digital reading, languages and libraries
- Resources for NGOs
- Latest news and analysis



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