

House of Movements Resource Centre

Information for social change

It is common knowledge that the poor have less access to education and information material. **Andreas Kaiser** talks about a Khanya College project which is trying to address this issue in the Johannesburg area in its impressive new House of Movements Resource Centre.

When it comes to education and information large parts of the South African non-white population do not have the same access to information such as libraries, archives or the Internet as the white population. To overcome this historical gap is one of the great challenges of the new South Africa.

Despite improvements since the end of apartheid, illiteracy is still wide-spread. The legacy of an impoverished and discriminatory education system can still be felt. Those who were the victims of apartheid education are again being denied access to information and books.

Education means a basic level of formal education, but also access to books through shops, libraries and resource centres. A reading culture and literacy means interaction with, and through books and media from an early age. Yet the majority of South Africans living in the townships and rural areas do not participate in this educational and reading culture. If we acknowledge that not only intellectuals or the middle classes can be critical

readers or users of texts and information, then we must believe in the importance of resource centres, in community reading projects and in local history writing.

Libraries and resource centres play a vital role as access points to information. Taking a look at the South African library scene, the gap between a few well equipped academic and public libraries and others in areas without, or with only badly functioning libraries, becomes obvious.

State-funded institutions are struggling. There is a decline in the quality and number of libraries all over the country. But the informal sector of popular education outside traditional environments is suffering most. Social movement institutions get little support from public sources in South Africa. Government, civil society organisations, as well as aid organisations need to make a contribution to tackling these shortcomings.

Many interventions are needed to overcome the social, cultural, economic and educational barriers

that exist in South Africa. Social movements and community organisations can play a vital role in this process.

HOUSE OF MOVEMENTS RESOURCE CENTRE

Since its establishment in the 1980s, the Workers' Library and Museum in Johannesburg has been dedicated to preserving the heritage of workers and disadvantaged people in South and southern Africa.

The library was first located in the Newtown complex and achieved a number of impressive goals in the ten years of its existence. It was a museum and a conference centre and made literature and information accessible through the resource centre, Internet cafe and a small bookshop.

After years of financial difficulties, including a difficult donor environment and lack of support from local and national government (including a long fight with the Johannesburg City Council to develop the Newtown site), the Workers' Library eventually looked for alternatives. This led to a partnership between the Workers' Library and Khanya College, a non-governmental organisation.

Khanya has been involved in the struggle for popular education and the empowerment of the oppressed since anti-apartheid days. In 2006 the library, together with Khanya College, moved to a new building on the east of the Johannesburg city centre. The

original plans for the Newtown complex were transferred to the building, which was to be a home for NGO and social movement organisations which could share communal facilities. It would become a real House of Movements. The museum remained in Newtown.

The plan was to house core projects in the House of Movements. These were a computer and media training centre, a library and resource centre, a conference, exhibition and events facility, a printing and photocopying centre and a book and coffee shop.

In the last two years all projects except the book-cum-coffee shop have been successfully launched. The printing centre and the conference and events facilities are up and running. In October 2007 the new resource centre and the computer centre facilities, were opened under the name of House of Movements Resource Centre.

Apart from Khanya, a number of organisations such as Jubilee South, Workers World Media Productions, Anti-Privatisation Forum and the Reproductive Rights Alliance have moved into the building. These organisations as well as other communal facilities form an important framework for the Resource Centre.

RESOURCE INFORMATION AND SERVICES

The Resource Centre offers access to information and literature through a variety of media types and has a welcoming environment. Readers can find a range of information on topics such as South African and international history and politics, and social, economic and cultural issues.

Historically, the collection had a focus on the anti-apartheid struggle, on trade union and labour

issues as well as on socialist theories. Today, these themes sit alongside topics around new social movements and community struggles. There are books and journals on women and gender studies, on land, water and housing, on health including HIV/AIDS, on globalisation and neo-liberalism around the world.

Information comes in the form of books (6 000 titles, including a large fiction section), journals (75 current subscriptions, 500 historical titles), newspapers (10 current subscriptions), audio-visual resources (150 videos and DVDs), posters, banners, 'grey' literature (3 000 unpublished reports, brochures, conference and workshop papers) and archival material. Over time more of this will be made available electronically online.

Resources are housed in a spacious reading room, where users can find desks to sit at and study, where people come and relax on the sofas in the newspaper corner, where reading and study groups gather around a table and use the Centre's resources for meetings.

The book collection is accessible via an Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). Users will be able to search for books (and later other media types) on the computer which will soon be on the Centre's website. Visitors can watch videos and DVDs in the multimedia room. Photocopying facilities are available. Books can also be borrowed. Older books and journals are stored in the library magazine, but brought up to the reading room on demand.

The resources come from a variety of sources. The Workers' Library book and journal collection forms the core, which was merged with the resources of Khanya College, Jubilee South and the Anti-

Privatisation Forum. Contributions from local and foreign donors, such as book donations from the UK Friends of the Workers' Education of South Africa, have been of key importance. The support of individuals and organisations will remain vital for the Resource Centre's sustainability.

Next to the library is a computer centre which gives free access to computer programmes and Internet facilities. Community members can make use of the 20 computers with the assistance of Khanya's IT-staff. Computer and media training courses also take place in this centre.

The biggest challenge is to attract and reach out to as wide an audience as possible in order to improve its role as a vibrant part of the House of Movements and the local social movement scene.

In the coming years, the Resource Centre will place a strong focus on out-reach projects and cooperation with various partners and communities, to find new and innovative ways of engagement.

The Resource Centre can only face these challenges and perform its role in promoting education and information to all South Africans with the support of its users and constituencies, with the help of partner organisations and donors, and as part of a lively national and regional network of resource centres and libraries. LB

*House of Movements
Resource Centre
6th floor, 123 Pritchard Street
Johannesburg
Open Monday to Friday,
9:00 to 16:00
Tel: 011 336 9190
Email: library@khanyacollege.org.za*

Andreas Kaiser is resource centre manager at Khanya College.