

# This Compass points the way in the battle against HIV/AIDS

The battle against HIV/AIDS in South Africa is a mammoth task, fraught with logistical hurdles. The rate of infection is enormous, and South Africa has the highest rate of HIV infection in the world; not a happy statistic.

Apart from the sheer volume of work that HIV education, prevention and treatment generate, there is also the challenge of coordinating these functions. So many private, NGO and state organisations are involved, that there are bound to be overlaps - or gaps - in their application. This became the rallying point for The Compass Project, funded by the Netherlands and run by the Foundation for Professional Development (FPD) in Gauteng.

Identifying an opportunity where they could be of assistance, MapIT, the company that pioneered digital mapping in South Africa, stepped in, offering The Compass Project a tool called MarketScope, which is also used by businesses to chart demographic trends in the market place. MarketScope pools demographic data and geo-spatial map data, and has proved to be the ideal solution for charting, in map format, the spread of HIV/AIDS in relation to local population counts. MapIT's geocoding and subsequent map production allows planners to pinpoint the location and adequacy of earlier established medical resources to service communities in specified areas, allowing practitioners to rapidly identify areas of need, or zones of service duplication. Members of the public are also able to use the interactive web mapping page (<http://compass.mapservice.co.za>) to search for their closest HIV testing facility, and get directions.

Janine Mitchell, head of The Compass Project says, "This is an incredibly powerful piece of software that has already proven its efficacy on a regional scale - such as in the broader Tshwane community. It's now time to widen its scope to the national platform, and we hope that role-players will seize this opportunity with both hands by contributing the vital data required to populate the maps."

The FPD, working closely with the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) and the Department of Health, has applied a software application which will work hand-in-glove with the HCT (HIV Counselling and Testing) Campaign, which was launched in April with the aim of testing 15 million sexually active individuals in South Africa by the end of 2011.

This task includes the collation of statistics received from field workers (i.e. educators, social workers, researchers and medical personnel) and processing it in such a way as to yield an accurate map of all service providers and accurate HIV service-provision information.

Using this information, organisations, service providers, government and the private sector, would be in the position to more effectively plan, strategise and address HIV/AIDS issues within their respective communities.

For people who are 'on the ground' in the fight against HIV/AIDS, it's difficult to 'see the wood for the trees', so to speak. They need someone to 'zoom out' on their behalf, and get a sense of the bigger picture. In short, then, this project seeks to gather information from all players in the field, process it into an easy-to-comprehend map, and then feed it back to all the individual participants, who can use this not only as a productivity tool within their own organisations, but as a guide to better coordinate their efforts with others around them who are involved in complementary pursuits.

"Although MarketScope has myriad commercial applications, we're pleased and proud to be able to put it to the service of such a vital, life-sustaining project," explains Etienne Louw, MD of MapIT.

The software is currently being tweaked to identify HIV testing sites and include all social, health and education services across sectors. Apart from expanding MarketScope beyond the specific requirements of the HIV/AIDS service community, there are also hopes that it will also be put to beneficial use beyond South Africa's borders.

## **The project's taken on the road**

The FPD will share The Compass Project at the SA Aids Conference that takes place in Durban from June 7th to 10th, and will also reveal it to delegates of the International HIV Social Sciences and Humanities Conference, that takes place in the same city from June 11th to 13th. "We hope that South Africans will realise the significance of this project, and join the health sector in throwing their enthusiasm behind this innovative, world-leading project," says Mitchell.

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