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Advisory Note

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Gabrielle Kelly (Nal'ibali Trust), Tara Polzer-Nqwato (Social Impact Insights Africa)

The National Reading Barometer: A Catalyst for Coordinated Action in Addressing the Reading Crisis in South Africa

Introduction and Overview

In 2023, the 2023 Reading Panel Background Report (Spaull, 2023) and the sequential release of the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results underscored the imperative for sweeping institutional changes to fortify meaningful reading practices. This extends beyond the confines of classrooms, emphasising reading as a vital sociocultural practice. The call for systemic transformation necessitates collaboration and empowerment across a diverse spectrum of stakeholders, including caregivers, early childhood development practitioners, libraries, literacy non-profits, publishers, businesses, and philanthropists. The goal is to actively promote reading, establish conducive reading environments, and ensure essential elements are in place across all age groups, including the provision of home-language texts in schools, homes, and libraries, allocated time for reading in classrooms and homes, and appropriate testing to support early literacy development.

This piece offers an overview of the 2023 National Reading Barometer (NRB)¹ and its potential to foster collective understanding and collaborative action on reading. Led by Nal'ibali Trust in partnership with National Libraries South Africa, the NRB serves as an evidence-based visual gauge of the reading ecosystem's health. It consolidates and assesses data on policies, systems, structures, and behaviours influencing reading in South Africa, providing evidence to propel the urgently needed systems change. By driving collective understanding, informing decision-making on shared priorities, and inspiring collaborative action, the NRB aims to be a catalyst for positive change.

¹ The NRB was co-funded by National Libraries South Africa, DG Murray Trust, National Education Collaboration Trust and Zenex Foundation. Project leads supporting Nal'ibali at the time of publication were Katie Huston and Dr Katherine Morse, while Dr Tara Nqwato-Polzer from Social Impact Insights led the survey research, data analysis and writing of the report.

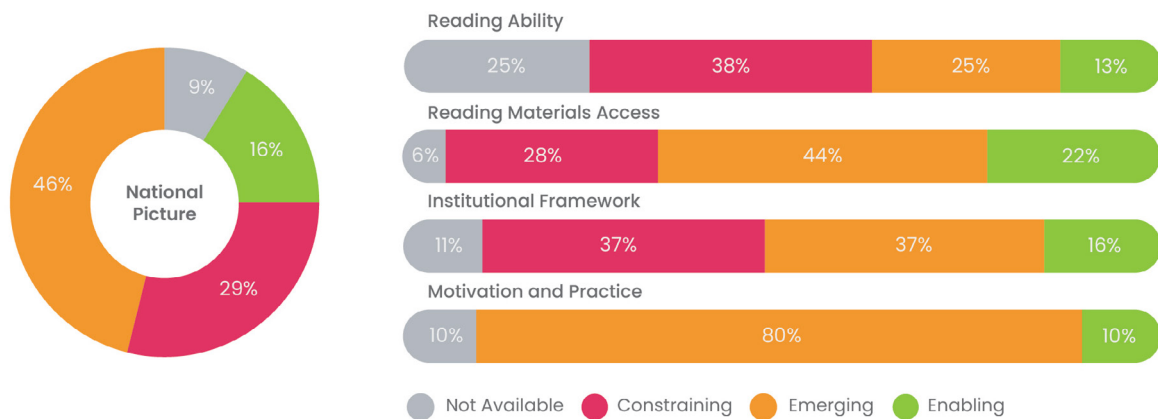
The barometer's development involved broad stakeholder consultation on what needed to be measured and the available data landscape. Utilising a multi-dimensional approach, the NRB employs 55 measures to assess four key dimensions of the reading sector:

- **Reading Ability:** Covering early literacy, primary school reading outcomes, youth literacy, and adult literacy levels.
- **Reading Material Access:** Encompassing book ownership, library access, publishing industry contributions, distribution of free reading materials, and digital access.
- **Institutional Frameworks:** Evaluating the policy environment, government and private sector investments, and the education system's capacity to teach reading.
- **Reading Motivation and Practice:** Incorporating 2023 National Reading Survey findings on adult reading practices and reading with children.

Data, sourced from published secondary data and the 2023 National Reading Survey (Polzer-Ngwato et al., 2023), underwent evaluation against sector targets, comparative data from similar countries, equity considerations, and consultations with data owners. Indicators were categorized as "enabling," "constraining," "emerging," or "unavailable." The resulting overall barometer provides a snapshot of the reading ecosystem, while detailed ratings for each indicator are also accessible. The consultative process identified gaps in data, driving the need for further collection. Secondary data, aligned with established targets, facilitates cost-effective tracking over time.

The visual representation below highlights both strengths and weaknesses within the ecosystem and its sub-components, revealing significant constraints in reading ability, access to materials, and institutional frameworks. This summary delves into measures related to two specific dimensions of the NRB: Institutional Frameworks and Reading Materials Access, key influencers of reading outcomes (Reading Ability) and behaviour (Motivation and Practice). The full set of indicators across all four ecosystem dimensions is available here: <http://readingbarometer.org>.

Figure 1: Summary of National Reading Barometer Indicators



Institutional Framework

The Institutional Framework within the South African reading ecosystem serves as the incentive system governing the teaching of reading and the production and distribution of reading materials. This framework is influenced by government policies, associated budgets, and institutional capacities, as well as priorities set by non-governmental entities, including the private sector and civil society organizations. The institutional framework indicators in the National Reading Barometer (NRB) (referred to as IF1-19 in the text and Table 1 below) reflect the collective focus on reading importance across the literacy and reading ecosystem in South Africa. This dimension also gauges the coherence in understanding how different policies and institutions collaborate to promote reading throughout an individual's life.

Table 1: Barometer Measures: Institutional Framework (2023)

#	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	Dialogue	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

Examining the reading ecosystem holistically, it becomes evident that no single institution is exclusively mandated to oversee all aspects, necessitating coordination and collaboration, albeit challenging. The policy environment exhibits a mix of constraints and facilitators, lacking coordination among policies addressing schooling, materials, resourcing, and equity.

Key institutions and their roles in the reading ecosystem include:

- **Department of Basic Education (DBE):** Responsible for reading instruction in schools, and since 2022, Early Childhood Development. However, limited budget allocation to reading and literacy hampers the department's capacity to meet objectives.
- **DBE:** While guiding and overseeing school-level activities, its capacity to hold provincial departments accountable for reading policy implementation is severely limited.
- **Department of Higher Education and Training:** Mandated for adult education and limited adult literacy, but lacks focus on encouraging reading outside educational institutions. Inadequate teacher training in reading in African languages hinders basic education (IF17).
- **Public Libraries:** Under the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, these play a vital role in enabling reading, but lack a mandate or resources for addressing reading in homes, creating a policy vacuum (IF12-14).
- **Corporate Social Investment:** Contributes resources to education, but insufficient ringfencing for literacy and reading (IF4) and lacks coordination for effective funding utilisation.
- **Publishing and Educational Materials Industry:** Shapes material availability and affordability, constrained by government policies (IF5, IF15), and enabled by the absence of book import tariffs.

Reading Materials Access

The Reading Materials Access indicators within the National Reading Barometer (NRB) (referred to as RM1-18 in the text and detailed in Table 2 below) offer insights into a relatively robust publishing industry for a middle-income country (RM9). However, challenges persist in ensuring the affordable production and distribution of materials in all languages, with digital access growing but remaining unequal due to high data costs (RM16). Access to reading materials in homes presents a significant hurdle for children learning to read and young individuals eager to expand their knowledge through reading (RM17).

While schools serve as crucial sources of reading materials, the absence of functional libraries in many schools, coupled with a lack of available data, obstructs a comprehensive understanding of the issue's depth, impedes planning for improvements, and hampers progress monitoring (RM8). Public libraries, valuable for those with access, face a significant underfunding challenge (RM3), and the uneven distribution of libraries across provinces falls short of required norms and standards (RM2 & RM5).

The critical aspect of reading materials availability in appropriate languages becomes evident, particularly for adults reading with young children and those in the early stages of learning to read. Unfortunately, only 3.7% of educational titles commissioned by institutions and produced by the South African publishing industry are in African languages (RM13).

In contrast, civil society organizations produced and distributed over 6 million pieces of free printed reading materials for children in 2022, with a substantial portion available in African languages. Despite these efforts, the distribution remains insufficient relative to demand, and the coordination among government, civil society, and the private sector falls short, resulting in unequal access based on geography, language, and income group. Notably, there has been a 42% improvement in caregivers accessing free reading materials compared to 2016 (National Reading Survey, 2016). However, the struggle persists, with over half of caregivers still lacking access (RM14). The situation is more severe for children, with just over a third of those under 10 having any age-appropriate books at home (RM18).

Table 2: Barometer Measures: Reading Materials Access (2023)

#	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
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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
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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 timely 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

Conclusion

In summary, the South African reading ecosystem requires enhanced coordination and collaboration among institutions to address challenges and optimise the impact of policies and resources. The NRB serves as a crucial instrument for understanding and addressing the reading crisis in South Africa. As we navigate these complexities, the barometer stands poised to guide coordinated actions, fostering a collective commitment to drive positive systemic change in the nation's approach to reading.

References:

Polzer-Ngwato, T., Shilakoe, L., Morse, K. & Huston, K. (2020) National Reading Survey 2023 Findings Report. Cape Town: Nal'ibali Trust. <https://www.readingbarometersa.org/content/national-reading-survey-2023-findings-report>

Spaull, N. (2023) 2023 Background Report for the 2030 Reading Panel. Cape Town.