The Liberty Life Foundation

The Liberty Life Group’s history of social involvement spans twenty-eight years since the inception of the Donald Gordon Foundation in 1971. These past three decades have seen fundamental changes in South Africa and our operations and philosophy, which are dynamic, have shifted in accordance with changing needs and priorities.

Our early emphasis, from 1971 to 1982, was placed on the plight of the aged, the disabled and children in need of care. Over the years an ever-growing educational thrust and a stronger community focus have complemented our welfare work and we have become increasingly involved in the processes of development.

South Africa is faced with daunting challenges including the creation of employment and rapid urbanisation coupled with intensifying poverty. Chronic unemployment has exacerbated social strife manifested by crime and violence. Poverty inevitably leads to further deterioration in health, social services and the environment. We have also inherited huge backlogs in education, housing, health, water and sanitation – in fact, in every area of human endeavour.

Indiscriminate donor funding, coupled with difficult socio-economic realities, created an ethos of entitlement. We do not encourage an environment in which handouts are the norm. Because we are sincere about development we have avoided practices that effectively disempower the very people they were intended to advance. Our guiding philosophy, therefore, is to foster sustainability in development.

President Nelson Mandela at the Rehabilitation Employment Concerns’ factory, which we established with NICRO in order to provide training and create jobs for ex-offenders. Ex-prisoners risk returning to crime unless significant support and viable alternatives are provided.

The ‘wind-up products’ projects have exceeded all expectations. The NICRO factory and the facility owned by Disability Employment Concerns together produce as many as 50 000 radios and flashlights monthly for export. The ‘wind-up radio’ creates employment, advances ecologically friendly electric power generation, increases access to education and entertainment, and empowers members of the disabled community.

For disabled people, alternative employment too often is in subsidised and uneconomical sheltered workshops. For ex-offenders there is seldom any alternative. Our approach creates taxpaying workers with independent lives who generate export earnings for South Africa.
The Mbilwi Senior Secondary School in the village of Sibasa, near Thohoyandou in the Northern Province, was the first winner of the Liberty Life Sunday Times Award for Excellence in Education. Mbilwi is desperately under-resourced with crumbling classrooms, shortages of textbooks and pit toilets. The school, which has up to 94 pupils in a lesson, now boasts a 100% matric pass rate for the past four years and a 100% exemption rate for the last three. Pupils who credit the Liberty Life Learning Channel and teleteacher William Smith with some of their success in mathematics and science use its only television set in rotation.

Buy-Afrika helps existing small manufacturers upgrade their design, workmanship and production capacity to meet the standards of international markets; assists South African manufacturers find markets for their output via the Buy-Afrika database (www.buy-afrika.com); sources and inspires unique southern African goods; and ultimately rewards new designers and producers.

Seven hundred manufacturers with nearly 3 000 products are on what is the biggest, most comprehensive electronic catalogue of southern African products anywhere. The web-site is extensively used for sourcing by buyers both nationally and internationally. Individual manufacturers report an increasing number of substantial orders from buyers who contact them directly. As the market expands more people will be employed.

We employ all available media in an attempt to deliver quality educational material to the widest number of students across the country. The Liberty Life Learning Channel, in partnership with the SABC, continues to deliver approximately 600 hours of free lessons taught by some of the country’s finest teachers. We produce and sponsor supplements with the Independent Newspaper Group and publish readRight in partnership with The Sunday Times. The Sowetan carries our very successful Friday supplement, which complements the television programmes. We are currently engaged in building a school on the internet (www.learn.co.za).

The Mbilzi Senior Secondary School in the village of Sibasa, near Thohoyandou in the Northern Province, was the first winner of the Liberty Life Sunday Times Award for Excellence in Education. Mbilzi is desperately under-resourced with crumbling classrooms, shortages of textbooks and pit toilets. The school, which has up to 94 pupils in a lesson, now boasts a 100% matric pass rate for the past four years and a 100% exemption rate for the last three. Pupils who credit the Liberty Life Learning Channel and teleteacher William Smith with some of their success in mathematics and science use its only television set in rotation.