

Lance Harris

Using ICT to help the disabled to become independent

The South African Government has launched an ICT project that aims to help disabled people integrate into the mainstream of the country's society and economy.

More than 12% of SA's population, or around four million people, live with moderate or severe disabilities. Less than 1% of disabled South Africans are gainfully employed and most are financially dependent on charities, welfare or family.

Helping these people to become independent so that they can take part in the economy and improve the quality of their lives is one of government's strategic objectives for the next five years. The National Accessibility Portal (NAP), a R&D project backed by the highest levels of government, is producing ICT applications that could go a long way towards meeting these goals.

The project is an initiative of the Meraka Institute, a number of organisations that represent disabled people, and the Office on the Status of Disabled Persons (OSDP) at The Presidency. The Meraka Institute is a body based at the CSIR, which was established by government to undertake R&D and skills development geared towards using ICT to address SA's wealth creation and developmental challenges.

At the heart of the initiative is a portal that will be developed to offer a platform to blind, deaf and physically disabled people allowing them to access information, interact with other people and even apply for jobs.



*Hina Patel,
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Institute.*

“NAP is an example of the Meraka Institute's innovation activities aimed at improving quality of life through research and development in ICT.”

– Hina Patel, competence manager: information society applications, Meraka Institute.

The portal will be supported by the development and deployment of tools that provide easy-to-use interfaces to computers for disabled people. The goal

is to provide a service that disabled South Africans will be able to use irrespective of their age, disability, literacy level or home language.

The portal will also eventually provide charities, social workers, NGOs, health care professionals and employers with a channel to access information, statistics and services around disability.

“Difficulties in communicating with others and a lack of access to information are among the biggest factors keeping persons with disabilities out of SA's economic mainstream,” says Hina Patel, competence manager: information society applications at the Meraka Institute.