

New AI startup pays South Africans to grow digital maps in townships

What if Pokémon Go could help tackle real-world problems in African communities? A South African startup is doing just that—mapping real businesses and transforming lives in townships across the country.



From left: Zain Forbes, Christine Barrow, Phelelani Mhize and Matimba Nkuna (CEO of Timbuk2) | image supplied

AI startup Timbuk2 has created something special: a project that turns everyday township residents into data collectors who earn real money while putting their communities on the digital map.

Instead of chasing virtual creatures like Pokémon Go, young people and local residents are hitting the streets to find and document the countless small businesses that keep township economies alive - from corner shops to hair salons to car washes. Using just their phones, these "data agents" capture photos, chat with owners, and share business details through Timbuk2's dashboard.

Every successful submission puts cash in their pockets. It's like a treasure hunt with a serious purpose - finally documenting South Africa's massive informal economy so it can better support the millions who depend on it.

Unknown spaza shops

Data collectors recently walked the streets of Tlhabane, Rustenburg, and discovered that 79% of spaza shops were unknown—invisible to platforms like Google Maps and unlikely to be noticed by food distributors wanting to expand their networks.

"These businesses are the backbone of township life, but officially, they barely exist on paper," explains Timbuk2's founder. "We're changing that by making mapping fun, social, and worthwhile for the people who

know these communities best."

The impact goes way beyond just creating a better map. This data helps everyone from government planners to business owners make smarter decisions that benefit local communities.

Plus, it's creating legitimate earning opportunities for township youth while building a first-ever comprehensive picture of South Africa's grassroots economy.



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An interesting discovery during the data collection is that there are three water purification areas located in Tlhabane, which speaks to the community's need for clean water.

Timbuk2's dashboard keeps users engaged with challenges, rewards, and friendly competition. But participants aren't just collecting dry data - they're sharing the real stories of local entrepreneurs and bringing township business culture to life.

By 2026, Timbuk2 wants to expand this model across Africa. As their founder puts it: "We're not just drawing a map - we're empowering communities to showcase their economic strength and potential. This is ekasi telling its own story, in its own words."

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