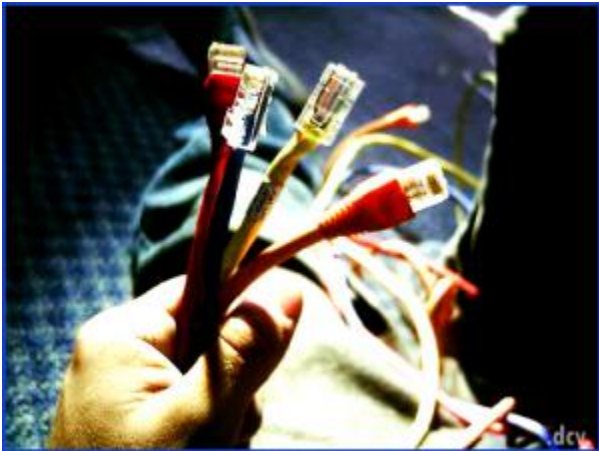


It's not enough to have a pushy broadband policy in Tanzania

By John Mireny for APCNews

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High speed [internet](#) cables

Like its East African neighbours, Tanzania shares an unwavering faith in high-speed broadband. Broadband, the story goes, will be the panacea to myriad societal woes – including poverty, poor education and health services, and a lack of [government](#) services. Optical [fibre](#) running through the heart of the country has the potential to change the country's social and economic fabric for good.

This faith is backed-up by policy. Broadband is one of the centerpieces of the country's ambitious six-year National [ICT](#) Policy launched in 2003. In 2005, in an attempt to achieve these policy goals, regulations governing broadband services were incorporated into the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority Act (TCRA) – ahead of some of its neighbouring rivals.

But, despite these strides, many argue that the country is in danger of slipping behind in the race to build an information society, and its dream of being a competitive regional hub fast vanishing. There is a gap, it is argued, between policy and what is really happening on the ground.

Slow take-up of broadband

The initial thinking behind adopting regulations for broadband services was to give prospective [ICT](#) investors the chance to invest in a wide range of technologies that can be used to improve access to businesses and homes. But although the TCRA is far ahead in implementing the broadband policy through, for instance, creating a converged licensing framework (CLF), take-up by businesses is sluggish.

There are many reasons for this slow uptake. It has been partly blamed on the lack of a [fibre](#)-optic undersea cable system connecting the country with the rest of the world. Satellite-based broadband services are not commercially viable, especially in offering broadband connectivity and [ICT](#) services in rural Tanzania. Only some terrestrial [fibre](#)-optic cables with excess capacity are owned by the country's power utility Tanzania Electric Supply Company (Tanesco), and a few isolated water utilities.

This technological gap is about to join the history books as SEACOM, the first [fibre](#)-optic cable to provide broadband to countries in East Africa becomes operational. When fully functional, SEACOM will provide high-capacity bandwidth along the east coast of Africa through South Africa, Mozambique, Madagascar, Tanzania, Kenya and Djibouti, and onwards to the rest of the world via landing points in France and India.

Testing is now underway at a landing station on the coast of Dar es Salaam. More broadband synergies are also expected after the completion of the Eastern Africa Submarine Cable System (EASSy) next year. EASSy would be cheaper than satellite, and promises a radical ramp up of broadband capacity.

Currently, the use of satellite for data transfer costs about USD300 per megabyte per second, while the use of [fibre](#)-optic cable will reduce costs to USD100.

Landing a cable is not enough

But landing a cable is one thing. Getting it to the people is another. The [government](#) anticipates that public-private partnerships will venture into developing nationwide backhaul terrestrial links to make the country part of the global village. However, a sound investment strategy for attracting these partnerships is not ready, even though some construction of [ICT backbone](#) has actually started.

A latent demand for cheaper broadband services exist in Tanzania, with its dismal [internet](#) penetration rate of 1%, according to data released by the Bogota based Miniwatts Marketing Group in March this year. By contrast, [internet](#) penetration in neighbouring Uganda is twice as much at 2.4%. South Africa's penetration rate is now 9.4%.

Currently, [ICT](#) business opportunities in providing high-speed broadband services, with a minimum downstream capacity regulated at 256 kilobytes per second, are concentrated in urban areas. Even in rural towns, the possibility of using broadband to spur services like distance learning and telemedicine are limited by weak demand.

Policy does not address weak demand

The country's broadband policy does not proactively address this weak demand for broadband services, with little or not vision for the link to education, health, local [government](#), small and medium enterprises (SMEs), civil society and homes. A long-term demand-side strategy would offer support and be an incentive for content creation; it would, amongst other things, encourage public TV and libraries to put more content online, and promote a culture of digital literacy for all Tanzanians.

Broadband policy implementation has also lately been marred by ambiguity regarding an official directive that requires all analogue-based technologies to migrate to digital platforms by 2015. Those who have invested in analogue broadcasting technologies are lamenting the cost implications of this migration. Although the strategy is aimed at maximizing deployment of broadband services through CLF, its implementation is apparently slow because it is seen as punitive to these investors.

Unfortunately, the [government](#) is yet to heed stakeholders' calls to establish a subsidy fund, most feasibly drawn from the Universal Access Fund, to facilitate a smooth migration process.

What is the timeline?

Tanzania's broadband policy, as it stands, lacks an aggressive timeframe – such as, say, providing a minimum 100 megabytes per second access to all businesses and institutions within five years. Such a strategy could be tailored to specific tax incentives for the terrestrial [fibre](#)-optic infrastructure's prospective partnerships, and speed up the realisation of the social and economic benefits of broadband services.

Interestingly, broadband services regulations express enthusiasm for the potential of broadband-power-line technology that could enable electric power lines to function as a third 'wire' into homes. This would create competition with copper telephone lines and the expected debut of cable television coaxial cable line operators. But this sounds like a dream that will never become true in a country where the power grid is grossly unreliable, and power outages are the order of the day.

When it comes to practical application, it is as if [ICT](#) planners are still groping for optimal strategies. The lack of a concrete broadband plan, which takes into consideration real-life conditions, and has measurable outcomes and realistic targets, is missing.

Little information to plan ahead

Despite the need for informed planning and stimulating investment, the regulator does not publish data on broadband [internet](#) subscriptions, even if it does publish data on fixed-line and mobile subscribers. Better broadband data collection is an important supply-side policy consideration when marketing broadband services to both big and small businesses.

And while broadband regulations are in place, worrying uncertainties remain; for instance, whether or not business-friendly regulatory measures will be drafted to ensure investors in terrestrial [fibre](#)-optic cables will be made subject to third party access regimes. Third party access supports competition by enabling competitors to access essential infrastructure which they cannot afford to build themselves.

Likewise, it is not clear whether the envisaged national [fibre](#) networks will be subject to interconnection regulation, something that has caused friction between the TRCA and mobile phone operators. Analysts are also of the view that in order to ensure that the full economic and social benefits of the national broadband network are properly realised, it is essential that the policy enshrines network neutrality in legislation.

By some accounts, the regulator is aware of at least some of these issues. Three years ago, the TCRA's Raymond Mfungahema told a gathering of [ICT](#) policy-makers and regulators in South Africa that "regulation of the communications industry is dynamic and ever changing". He said the TCRA-enabling act and regulations made in 2005 needed to be reviewed to accommodate changes in the sector. But that was three years ago: we are still waiting.

This article was written as a part of APC's [Communication for influence in Central, East and West Africa \(CICEWA\) project](#), which is meant to promote [advocacy](#) for the affordable access to [ICTs](#) for all. CICEWA seeks to identify the political obstacles to extending affordable access to [ICT](#) infrastructure in Africa and to advocate for their removal in order to create a sound platform for sub-regional connectivity in East, West and Central Africa.

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