

# Kenya, Burundi and Madagascar secure funds for hi-speed internet

By [Muthoni Kariuki](#)

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Kenya, Burundi and Madagascar have secured a \$164.5 million (approx R1.17 billion) loan from the World Bank to help roll-out high-speed internet networks.

The World Bank said the money was being made available to boost business competitiveness in the region.

Eastern and much of southern Africa is the only region in the world not connected to the global broadband infrastructure, the World Bank said.

Kenya will take the lion's share of the funding, with a \$114.4 million loan. Madagascar is due to receive a \$30 million loan, while Burundi will receive a grant worth \$20.1 million, the World Bank said.

The Washington-based lender said businesses in the three countries were being held back because of the lack of high-speed internet networks.

"University students suffer because they cannot access the internet, and government agencies cannot communicate effectively with each other and their citizens because they are not connected," the bank added.

Currently, the region relies on satellites for connectivity, with costs among the highest in the world.

But World Bank president Paul Wolfowitz said Africa was becoming increasingly "plugged-in".

"Improving broadband connectivity will add tremendous public value for Africa," he said. "Low-cost, high-quality communications is essential for economic competitiveness."

The head of Kenyan outsourcing firm KenCall, backed the World Bank's move.

"It is absolutely imperative that something be done right now to make bandwidth affordable," said KenCall chief executive, Nicholas Nesbitt. "Otherwise, we're going to miss a huge opportunity and people are simply going to say that Africa is not ready for these kinds of jobs, is not ready for business."

African countries are on course to build the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Broadband Network.

Currently, 12 out of 23 African countries have signed the NEPAD ICT Broadband infrastructure protocol, which commits them to building the network.

The South African Parliament will have ratified the protocol by the middle of this year.

The signing of the protocol provides for the project's speedy implementation and involves the construction of a 9 900 kilometer Eastern African Sub-Marine System (EASSy) cable from Mtunzini village in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, to Sudan.

This network will have all participatory countries linked up among them before being linked to the rest of the world, thereby integrating Africa's communication by harmonising ICT infrastructure initiatives.

It is expected that once in operation, the initiative will see communication costs in the continent decreasing.

The inaugural signing of the protocol was held in Kigali, Rwanda in August last year, where seven countries including South Africa signed.

This was followed by Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mauritius and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Countries that are yet to sign are Angola, Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Somalia, Sudan and Swaziland.

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