

Malawi creates a digital migration communication strategy

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With 31 December 2013, the day Malawi is expected to switch to digital broadcasting, fast approaching, Malawi has put in place a Digital Migration Communication Strategy expected to provide a framework for communication of the Digital Broadcasting Migration Project.

The draft policy aims at sensitizing all stakeholders and the general public in addition to preparing them for the digital migration process.

The strategy is intended for all stakeholders who will be affected by the migration process from analogue to digital broadcasting and will also ensure that all affected stakeholders understand and fully participate in accordance with their roles in the country.

The strategy lists these stakeholders who include policy makers, traders, media agencies and the general public.

Key strategic elements

It also draws special attention to the four key strategic elements which is to be communicated and includes:

- Universal right to know with regard to literacy levels;
- Community participation;
- Appropriate media mix; and
- Research, monitoring and evaluation

Another area of focus for the strategy is on the activities to be carried out, where key events and dates will be observed and implemented before December 2013, the set deadline for migration and those be undertaken during the second phase when the country has fully migrated to digital broadcasting.

"It should be noted however, that implementation of activities will be assessed, reviewed and changed during the digital migration process period," reads the strategy statement.

The Communications Strategy Task Force

It also appoints the ministry of information as the custodian of the strategy in liaison with the Communications Strategy Task Force.

This task force comprise of the Ministry of Information (Moi), the Ministry of Finance (MoF) Ministry of Economic Planning (MoEP), Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) and Luntha TV of the Catholic Church.

The information ministry is expected to designate personnel with adequate understanding of implementation of communications strategies to ensure that all activities outlined in the strategy are well executed.

Communication is essential

At the moment, the strategy notes that Malawi's broadcasting sector is under major transformation regarding the pending switchover from the analogue to digital broadcasting; digital migration being a new phenomenon to Malawi it is least understood by Malawians in general.

"Communication is essential to providing information that is required in preparing stakeholders to adopt the switch-over from analogue to digital broadcasting," the statement reads.

From analogue to digital technology

Digital migration is the transition process from analogue to digital technology in terms of the delivery of broadcasting services catering for both television and radio using digital compliant platforms, which is the sending and receiving of moving images and sound by discrete or discontinuous signals which has improved quality of picture and sound, as opposed to the current analogue set-up, which is a continuous signal of sound, light, picture of which the variable is a representation of some other time varied quantity.

It adds that if the masses understand the advantages or benefits of digital switch-over, the risks involved and what actions are required to migrate to digital broadcasting, they will be ready to accept, embrace, support and adopt the change.

Strategy will be a guiding tool

Government says that with the strategy in place, it will be a guiding tool on all communication regarding digital migration to ensure that there is full understanding of digital migration for all stakeholders at all levels.

The government of Malawi believes digital migration would be successful with the strategy in place since it has been formulated based on six principles one of which states that "it has been developed and implemented for most of the target groups such as policy makers, broadcasters, traders, retailers, the general public cooperating partners and the media".

The other principle is that implementation of the strategy is participatory so as to involve all stakeholders in the digital migration process while the other one is that the activities are designed to utilize available opportunities such as specific mandate for stakeholders and locally available resources.

Strategy facilitates proper usage

The strategy also sets clear objectives to facilitate proper usage of communication tools and concepts, establishing the timeframe and resources required; and monitoring, evaluation and reporting mechanisms which it states should be integrated in the strategy to ensure transparency and accountability and also that the work plan is respected and success is achieved.

The strategy has also taken into account several relevant factors including literacy levels, socio-economic status, attitudinal and cultural factors, among others, and as such various communication tools or channels will be used to ensure that all targeted audience is reached.

Informing and educating the nation

The strategy's overall goal is to have an informed and educated nation that is prepared for the change from analogue to digital broadcasting while its main objective is to inform, educate and communicate issues of digital migration to the Malawi nation to ensure preparedness.

Specifically, government says the strategy will help to raise awareness of digital migration in Malawi apart from advocating for increased financial resources and investment in digital migration.

It will also create an enabling environment for broadcasters in readiness of digital migration in Malawi as well as enabling active participation by equipping stakeholders with tools and skills for implementation in Malawi besides producing and disseminating messages and distribution of IEC materials.

Government has divided the strategy into two parts that will be addressed separately one which will be creating public awareness of digital migration; and another creating awareness and advocating for increased resource allocation and investment in digital migration among policymakers, technocrats, donors, regulators, and broadcasters and telecommunications operators.

The strategy is also scheduled to be branded with a logo and carry the tagline "Only digital can do".

"This entails that digital migration involves technological development and innovation, but at the same time, it can be understood as a social and economic process because it will also have unprecedented social and economic benefits to the people of Malawi and the country in general," the government says.

The broadcasting sector is currently under major transformation regarding the pending switchover from the analogue to digital broadcasting set in motion in year 2000 by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) with an agreed international deadline of June 2015 for the migration.

"Although the ITU set 2015 as the deadline for digital migration, SADC has designated 2013 as the year for switch over for all its member states, including Malawi. To this end, Malawi set out on the digital migration journey in 2009," the strategy statement reads.

The benefits of the migration

Government says with the expected increase in broadband service being on the raise in uptake by consumers of broadcasting services, this migration intends to bring several benefits.

Such benefits will include an increase in the range of services available to television users enabling enhanced interactivity and high definition as well as growing importance of internet as an aid to social networking and as a means to increased participation in content creation.

The strategy intends to help the masses to realisation of convergence with different types of content and communications services being delivered using the same pipes and consumed across a range of devices.

Digital migration is also set to release of spectrum usage for reuse for other new and innovative services; besides increasing efficiencies and long-term cost savings to the broadcasters on terrestrial transmission.

Government says since information and communication infrastructure development is one of the nine priorities of the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDSII) therefore with the migration to digital broadcasting Malawi will be ensured of the access to improved information and communication services like broadcasting.

The strategy also acknowledges that this is also in line with the attainment of Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 8 on

achieving global partnership for development and indicator on ICT.

Rapid technological changes

The government touts itself as the body that ably collects and disseminates information as well as manages and develops appropriate technologies, through its ministry of information just to ensure that the public is well informed and is enabled to embrace democracy and demand development as its right for accelerated social and economic growth.

It says this is possible through the Communications Act of 1998 that creates a sustainable and enabling environment for information and communication - a field which it acknowledges is experiencing rapid technological change.

The strategy statement says among these development areas or scope is the digital convergence which is a process which brings together audio, visual and data and in this regard, Malawi ratified to various international commitments that obligate governments to provide quality broadcasting services including the SADC declaration on digital migration.

"The analogue system of broadcasting, which most of the broadcasters are currently using, is phasing out and most of the equipment will soon be obsolete. The developed world is fast moving to digital convergence and developing countries, including Malawi, are geared to migrate to technology that complies with digital broadcasting," the statement declares.

The strategy has also dwelt on how it will carry out the whole process of the transition, with consideration there are some legal and/or regulatory issues to be considered, in terms of policy formulation; review license framework; implementation plan; and competition and fair trading.

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