

Survey highlights importance of Connect Africa goals

Informa Telecoms & Media yesterday, 11 November 2011, issued a report entitled 'Broadband in Africa' which assesses the progress of the goals set out at the Connect Africa Summit in 2007 and includes a C-level industry survey on the state of the broadband market in Africa.



These goals aim to interconnect African capitals and major cities with broadband infrastructure, to connect African villages to broadband services, to adopt regulatory measures so as to promote affordable and widespread access to broadband services, to support the development of ICT skills and to adopt national e-strategies.

Matthew Reed, head of mobile research for the Middle East and Africa at Informa Telecoms & Media and one of authors of the report, comments on the progress of broadband connectivity in Africa, "A combination of public and private investment, regulatory action, competition and technological innovation has made telecoms services in general more widely available to a more diverse range of the population. There is no room for complacency though - devices and services are still prohibitively expensive for the poorest, terrestrial cabling remains undeveloped and mobile network coverage is often sparse or non-existent in some rural areas."

According to figures published by Informa, a fifth of internet traffic in Africa will be carried by cellular networks by 2015, compared with a global equivalent of just 3%. Infrastructure investment on 3G networks has been rampant in recent years making mobile operators the main providers of internet services in Africa. Informa expects the broadband experience in Africa to become increasingly widespread with the number of broadband connections over cellular networks exceeding 250 million by the end of 2015, compared with 15 million fixed connections, of which 70% will be a digital subscriber line.

The industry's opinion

It has been recognised that broadband connectivity is becoming increasingly important in the growth of the telecommunications industry. 59% of respondents ranked mobile broadband services as being extremely important to the economic development of Africa - but there are very significant challenges facing the industry as it attempts to expand broadband rollout.

The five most widely articulated challenges according to the survey's respondents were:

- cost of expansion
- insufficient connectivity/backhaul
- cost of retail broadband services
- cost of international bandwidth and;
- low PC penetration.

While some good progress has been made in connecting cities and towns to a national terrestrial backbone, the percentage of villages connected to such a backbone remains very low. There needs to be a number of changes to the broadband market landscape in the next five years including cheaper services, more widespread availability of high-speed connectivity (focusing in particular on rural areas) and greater competition.

Joint author of the report, Nicholas Jotischky remarks that Connect Africa should not just be judged against "deliberately aggressive goals, but by how much private and public investment it has encouraged and whether regulators have become more proactive in forcing widespread broadband access and whether governments are choosing to engage closer with their citizens and transform internal processes with the help of various e-services. The truth is that looking at the continent as a whole progress towards a more universal use of broadband infrastructure is variable but at least it is underway."

Highlights

The report highlights the value of the role of regulators in adopting measures that will promote the affordable and widespread access of broadband services. The relaxation of licensing, allocation of more spectrum and direction of cheaper retail broadband services can all play a large part in accelerating Africa's journey to enter a high-speed internet age and become a fully-fledged knowledge economy.

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