

Rwanda's policy vacuum could mean trouble for broadband

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No quality control in Rwanda

Whatever else it is, information and communications technologies ([ICTs](#)) policy-making can often be symbolic, especially in poor countries. The vision is one of social upliftment, and a new golden age of possibilities brought on by technological roll-out. Sometimes these promises can feel like fantasy in contrast to the real spadework of laying cables, orbiting satellites, and securing [billion](#)-dollar investment deals that don't exploit the poor.

However, policies, especially when they are under-pinned by practical considerations, are necessary guidelines for the development of clear-headed legislation and regulation. Particularly when it comes the modern communications, driven forward by the inertia of rapid change and invention, a firm hand on the policy rudder is needed to keep a country on the track of sustainable and equitable development, so that all can benefit fairly from the advantages of [ICTs](#). When there is money to be made, it is worth emphasising, the person in the street sometimes has much to lose.

Rwanda at the centre of broadband fever

Rwanda – a poverty-stricken landlocked shadow of a country in East Africa, still bearing the scars of the 1994 genocide – is hailed in the region as having a high level of commitment and a unified approach to [ICT](#) development and roll-out. Its Vision 2020, for instance, emphasises the potential of [ICTs](#) for socio-economic development in urban and rural areas and the country has developed an economic development and poverty reduction strategy (EDPRS) with this as the guiding principle. As if in recognition of this commitment, Rwanda was also chosen amongst its peers to house the headquarters of the multi-million dollar Eastern Africa Submarine Cable Project (EASSy). And as the potential for viable businesses in the [ICT](#) sector grows, new entrants are rapidly moving into the market.

The opportunities and expectations that are the result of broadband fever in Africa are mounting. Several new undersea [fibre](#)-optic cables are planned or near completion on the continent – and Rwanda will not miss out on the boom. Reflecting broader trends on the continent, the [government](#) itself has been rolling out optical [fibre](#) along all of the country's main roads. The first phase, covering 134km, was already underway last year. From the main [fibre](#)-optic trunk, [internet](#) will be carried to the countryside via [wireless](#) technologies. It is said that the combination of [fibre](#)-optic [backbone](#) and 3.5 gigabytes per second WiMAX will cover the country and make, as the marketing copy would have it, Rwanda the most 'wired up' country in East Africa. The power utility company Electrogaz has also decided to establish a private [fibre](#)-optic network alongside its grid.

Until 1994, telecommunications service in Rwanda had mainly been utilised by the [government](#); but the period after the 1994 genocide marked the moment of fundamental change in Rwandan communications, with the [government](#) embarking on its strategy that aimed to increase connectivity as a spur to development. This entailed treating the sole [state](#)-owned telecommunication company at the time, Rwandatel, differently, and altering the [ICT](#) market structure. An independent regulatory body, known as the Rwanda Utility Regulatory Agency (RURA), was also set up, usurping the regulatory role played by the [incumbent](#) up until then. Starting with a 1998 national [ICT](#) workshop, the Rwandan [government](#) worked on a national framework for the development of the sector. This resulted in the [ICT](#)-led Integrated Socio-economic Policy for Rwanda adopted by the Cabinet in early 2000 and the National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) Plan. The plan was to be implemented in five-year phases, with a different focus for each phase.

Laying [fibre](#) brings new entrants to market

Terracom, a company that won the bid for Rwandatel during the government's privatisation process, was licensed to provide telecommunication services including mobile, fixed lines, [voice over internet protocol](#) and data services. The company was the first to put pick to earth to lay broadband cables. It deployed over 140km of [backbone fibre](#) network, including a Kigali-ring, and a national [backbone](#) link connecting Kigali, Gitarama and Butare. By the end of the NICI 2005 Plan time frame, the company had planned to roll out a total of 256km of [fibre](#) nationally.

Before June 2004, [internet](#) service providers were using international operators to carry their local as well as international traffic. The high cost of the satellite links and delays in connection made the situation unbearable, and limited the growth of the [internet](#) in Rwanda. However, despite the relatively embryonic [state](#) of Rwanda's [ICT](#) sector, new entrants are rapidly moving into the broadband market, with the whiff of potentially lucrative business opportunities in the air.

The main beneficiaries of broadband services are the private sector, particularly banks and insurance companies that have established branches across the country. The public sector is still under-served due to the high cost of access as well as the low level of usage. Development organisations, such as United Nations agencies, among others, are also important broadband customers, as they have various programme partners around the country and need to share information efficiently.

But a lack of policy stands in the way of growth

The growth of broadband faces several challenges. These include the high cost of access, and the low level of [ICT](#) usage for business transactions. But, arguably, one of the main challenges remains the lack of a clear broadband policy in Rwanda that can guide its development and provide regulatory guidelines for RURA to take appropriate measures to support its take up.

NICI is a plan, but it is not a policy – and is certainly not a broadband policy. A broadband policy would not only create a framework for mechanisms and incentives to increase the number of customers, but would also ensure that as many people as possible benefit from the new information economy in as equitable way as possible. So far, RURA has drafted service quality guidelines for broadband [internet](#) service and a consultation paper has been drafted.

Who will benefit from broadband?

Establishing a framework that allows free and fair competition in the market is important. One solution pushed by civil society and other stakeholders is a community-driven network based on [open access](#) principles. This is in line with the government's policy on decentralisation, which aims at creating community-ownership and proactive participation in decision-making. This would essentially allow all operators fair access to the broadband networks, rather than market monopolies to be formed by cable ownership, forcing the competition to be at the level of services.

The disastrous effects of cable monopolies have already been seen in countries like South Africa, which for years has struggled to bring down the cost of Telkom-controlled [internet access](#). In an [open access](#) network prices would be cost-based and all providers subscribed to common interconnection tariffs.

How the Rwandan [government](#) orientates the growing potential that is high-speed broadband, and negotiates sometimes competing interests, will be a test of its mettle, and commitment to its own progressive goals. Like all underdeveloped countries, it faces tough choices between economic investment by multinationals, and restrictions on open markets that will see universal targets being met and a level playing field prepared after the laying of [fibre](#). It is, in some respects, the hour of truth: without a clear business model that involves the community in [ICT](#) roll-out and services, who will have benefited most when the dust has settled?

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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