

Broadband a small part of the solution to digital divide

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It is evident that telecommunications and connectivity within developed countries is continually gaining impetus, becoming more advanced and utilised.



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On the other side of the spectrum, developing countries naturally lag behind; however, we are seeing the digital divide shrinking in some areas. The reality is that the rate of change within the developed world is beginning to reach a plateau while the developing world is catching up on technology.

This is not to say that all of the challenges within the developing world have been addressed, and many of these issues remain. However, while broadband connectivity can contribute to solving certain problems within the developing market, as it is an enabler of innovative new technologies, it is only one small component of the solution.

In Africa, including countries such as South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, there has been a significant amount of investment into developing and rolling out broadband infrastructure. From the initial connection of undersea cables to the continent by international players to the metro rings aimed at connecting cities, the market has now moved on to the last mile. The race is on to connect lucrative customers, and many providers are focusing on connecting entire suburbs as well as business, private homes, estates, retail centres and more.

Fibre technology

Driving the accelerated pace in the roll-out of fibre and broadband connectivity is a growing adoption and acceptance of cloud-based solutions, as enterprises strive to reduce IT spend while still maintaining access to leading-edge technology. This increased demand from big business in turn helps to broaden customer reach of fibre technology and reduce the price, making it a more affordable solution for a wider proportion of the market.

In South Africa in particular, this process is assisted by a fairly open and deregulated market, which enables healthy competition to develop from numerous service providers. However, while access to broadband connectivity in terms of the infrastructure is becoming less of a challenge, the African market still faces a number of other challenges.

By its very definition, the developing world often faces wider issues, including political instability, poverty, poor healthcare and education services for the majority of citizens, and a lack of economic activity, all of which need to be addressed. While broadband can assist in contributing to the solution in a number of these areas, it is only a small part of the solution.

Broadband can assist in the acceleration of economic activity, but this requires effective political governance, free and open market policies, effective regulation and a good understanding of best practices. The old model of state owned monopolies that still exists in many developing nations is not conducive to rapid broadband development, which may be hindering developing nations' ability to take advantage of next-generation technology.

Investment required

In addition, broadband development requires significant investment, which many economies cannot undertake by themselves. It is therefore essential for developing nations to foster a climate that attracts foreign investment, in order to enable the development of the infrastructure that is needed to fully bridge the digital divide.

While the digital divide may not be getting deeper, it still exists, particularly within the geographic imbalance of broadband distribution in the majority of African countries. More speed is not necessarily the answer, but more pervasive access is certainly a step in the right direction. However, it is also important to bear in mind that technical literacy and skills development are essential components of addressing this challenge as well.

Broadband, like any other technology, is not a magic wand, simply an enabler and a necessary platform. Opportunities still need to be developed, which requires support from government for innovation and entrepreneurship.

No silver bullet

While broadband can help to connect providers of services with a far larger market, and connect suppliers, markets and information crucial for success, it is by no means a silver bullet. Technology is a supporting tool, but ultimately people lie at the heart of innovation and support and leadership is needed to drive this.

Whilst broadband can become the bright light to accelerate change and economic progress, it is the political and regulatory fundamentals that need to follow global best practices to allow broadband deployment to flourish.

Countries that have committed to the correct governance models with effective law making and regulation are already starting to show leadership in the adoption and deployment of broadband and subsequent innovation.

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