

Being connected enables Africa's digital transformation

As the world's second largest and second most-populous continent, it's evident that broadband and mobile connectivity growth has had a dynamic impact on Africa. In 2017, mobile technologies and services generated 7.1% of GDP across Sub-Saharan Africa - a contribution that amounted to \$110bn of economic value added. By 2022, the mobile economy in the region will generate more than \$150bn (or 7.9% of GDP) of economic value.



Source: pixabay.com

With 300 million more people estimated to come online and 44 million cellular IoT connections predicted by 2025, jobs supported by the mobile ecosystem are expected to increase from 3 million in 2017, to 3.45 million in 2022.

With continuous progress being made to increase fixed-line connectivity, both at the backhaul and local level, the continent has built up successful broadband markets where good international links and effective competition have helped to keep prices affordable. What's more, there are a number of regional efforts underway to extend and connect neighbouring countries, where it is predicted the continent will be home to 22 million fixed broadband users by 2022.

Connectivity has huge potential

According to Ben Roberts, group chief technology and innovation officer at Liquid Telecom, access to internet connectivity is bringing about digital transformation across Africa in many areas.

“One area we see with huge potential for this transformation is education. Students of all ages can benefit hugely from faster access to global information and learning content. Digital learning can be tailored to the skills and interests of the individual, as well as to desired outcomes. Combining access to the internet with better quality education, skills development and opportunities to earn income from anywhere can enable individuals who wish to remain in rural or peri-rural areas to do so, rather than migrating to cities; thus, easing pressure on infrastructure and service delivery.”

Riaan Graham, sales director for Ruckus Networks (now CommScope) sub-Saharan Africa concurs.

“Connectivity is shaping the people and our digital economy in Africa. One trend we are seeing is the strategic investments by a number of African countries towards becoming regional hubs. We have seen that happen in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, but other countries are now shifting their focus, with strong inroads being made – just look at Angola, Cameroon, Ethiopia and Ghana. Many are realising that their time is now.”

Addressing the challenges

The continent is full of opportunity driven by access and connectivity but there are a few challenges that need to be tackled head on if we are to see continued growth and positive impacts.

“Many challenges are still experienced at the ‘last mile’ and even the last 50 metres,” adds Roberts.

“Most African countries have expensive fibre backbones built, but there remains a lot of investment left to be done in the ‘last mile’. Investment in rural and peri-rural areas is another challenge, because the business cases in these areas may not be as obvious. This is where innovative thinking, new business models along the value chain and partnerships between industry sectors to share costs, are required.”

Making a licensed spectrum available is also an ongoing challenge for regulators across the continent.

“East Africa, notably Kenya, is making real progress in assigning new spectrum and opening up legislation and regulation. While every country has a different level of maturity, we are not seeing this positive step being taken by other countries. If we move forward, we can’t continue repurposing 3G spectrum for 4G connectivity and beyond. The positive news is that from a network technology perspective, access gives way to hyperscale cloud computing, providing Africans access to the technologies required to develop digital businesses. Progressive policies will open this up further – providing more affordable access,” says Graham.

According to Graham, cost and the willingness to collaborate to achieve desired outcomes needs to be addressed if Africa wants to reap the rewards of affordable connectivity.

“IT has acted as a silo and the biggest barrier is accepting change. While many countries understand that digital transformation is required, integrating functions, previously perceived as a cost centre so closely into a national strategy can be daunting. This also often raises concerns around security, control and skills. What’s more, finding a balance between immediate gain and long-term sustainability is critical. There is no instant quick fix – but embracing change is a requirement.”

There is also a strong need to focus on ICT and socio-economic development investment through innovation.

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