Connecting East Africa with regional broadband is opening up opportunities

The Africa Development Impact Awards recognise excellence, innovation, results and quality of operations in each of the High 5s. The Awards go to operations supported by the African Development Bank which have demonstrated unique development impact and improved peoples’ lives in Africa.

To connect East Africa region to the global broadbank network, countries worked together to install a state-of-the-art high capacity optical fibre telecommunications network along their coasts. This 10 500 km-long cable lands in 9 countries. It connects 21 countries to each other and to the rest of the world, dramatically reducing the cost of access to the internet, which improve e-government applications and data openness, helped businesses as well as students. Higher network penetration came with increased internet speed and the scale of change is dramatic: in Kenya, the volume of internet traffic rose to 788 thousand Megabit per second in 2015, up from only 4 thousand in 2007.

**Challenge**

Eastern Africa was among the last regions of the continent without access to the global broadband network. Reliance on expensive satellite infrastructure and an ineffective telecommunications sector structured around monopolies led to exorbitant cost barriers that made access to the internet — a necessity for businesses and students — a luxury. This situation was a serious obstacle to the free flow of information and restricted the region’s capacity to compete in the global economy. Without access to data, it makes it hard for entrepreneurs to create jobs and for companies to expand production of goods without the right information on the level of demand.

**Approach**

Recognising the urgent need for more digital transmission capacity, East African governments and private sector players agreed that connecting East Africa through a fibre-optic network was a top priority. This led to the plan of installing the East African Submarine Cable System (EASSy) in a bid to provide the region with a 10 500 high capacity optical fibre telecommunications network along Africa’s East coast.

Countries chose to invest in this area through a Special Purpose Vehicle to allow smaller operators from different countries to club together and participate in the cable consortium. This helps lower individual entry investment and leverage funding from development finance institutions. Considering the importance of this initiative, the African Development Bank helped organise its financing.

The New Economic Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), E-Africa Commission and the development finance institutions were also involved in the project and helped regulating the business environment. They required that capacity should be sold or leased based on cost, to safeguard against profiteering and to ensure that excessive costs did not impede access.

**Impact**

Linking East African countries to high speed internet is key in driving economic growth. It helps businesses attract investment, and has made a big impact on people’s lives.

Overall, wholesale capacity prices in East African countries dropped by a staggering 90%, leading to subsequent reduction in retail prices that drove internet’s use upward. The case of Kenya is particularly dramatic:

- in Kenya, the volume of internet traffic increased from 4 thousand Megabit per second in 2007 rose to 788 thousand in 2015.
- The number of internet users skyrocketed to 23 million people in 2015, up from just over a million in 2007.

This led to enhanced regional integration by improving connectivity which benefits businesses and provides a platform for innovation. It improved education for students who now have access to online libraries and digital universities, connecting with students and lecturers from all over the continent and other regions. Governments are now increasingly operating online with e-passports, e-National IDs and E-birth registrations.