

Becoming an ICT hub for Central Africa

With strong technologies, including broadband and 3G, Congo shows off its good connections

Congo has made great strides in the area of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) since the armed conflict in the country ended in 1997.

It enjoys a relatively sophisticated and well-regulated telecommunications network, with strong and legitimate competition in place between the four main operators: Airtel, MTN, Warid and Azur, which has seen prices more than halve since 2008.

Mobile phone penetration is now at 90 percent and the ICT sector is modernizing at a rapid pace.

President Denis Sassou N'Guesso's administration is keen for the country to become an ICT hub for the region, and as such, has implemented far-reaching changes to bring the country up to world-class standards.

To improve connectivity, the World Bank has assured the financing and interconnection of fiber optic cables regionally and inter-regionally to connect Congo to its

ister of Post, Telecommunications and Technologies, Thierry Moun-galla.

"We hope to commercialize the network by the end of 2012 and provide it to the whole population by 2015."

Innovation nation

Congo is something of an ICT pioneer. As Minister Moun-galla pointed out, it was the first country in Central Africa to implement the 3rd-Generation network.

"By 2015, every service provider will give up the second generation to switch entirely to 3G, which will become the basic standard," Moun-galla said.

"There is an urgent need now to develop 3G-related technologies and other services. Azur, for example, is offering a Triple Play service that combines the Internet, TV and mobile phone."

Moun-galla is determined to secure Congo's smooth entrance into the Information Society, and

archives, which are currently still kept on hard copies and thus subject to deterioration."

The minister is overseeing a strategy to encourage the digital economy, in the provision of e-government, e-commerce, e-learning and e-health. "To ensure a safe and reliable system, we are working with international partners Microsoft for the software and Ericsson for the training," Moun-galla said.

"The sector is booming and offering many investment opportunities. Return on investments for incoming telecommunications service providers are guaranteed in Congo."

Ericsson partners Congo

Present in 52 African countries, ICT giant Ericsson started its operations in Congo in 2006 through a partnership with South Africa's MTN.

At the time, MTN set up the Ericsson Network, installing the Swedish company's equipment within its



Computer class: teaching the next generation.

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THIERRY MOUNGALLA
MINISTER OF POST, TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGIES

neighbors. This, the administration's largest project to date, has been made possible thanks to the technological back up of the Chinese Huawei Technologies and Alcatel Shanghai Bell.

Working jointly with the World Bank, the republic has invested heavily in the Central Africa Backbone, which, at a cost of \$55 million, will link up every part of the country, and ultimately connect Congo to its border neighbors, and the rest of the continent.

"The urban networks in Brazzaville and Pointe Noire are already 70 percent connected," says Min-

has earmarked the installment of a fast, reliable and cost-effective Internet connection as an immediate priority. This will eventually lead to universal access for the existing online administration system/e-government project.

"A reliable Internet connection will provide a faster and more efficient service for citizens, as for someone living in an isolated zone in the country, it can require a few days of travel to get a birth certificate or any official document from the civil state," Moun-galla said.

"Another positive impact to this will be the safety of the national

own system.

Neels Van Niekerk, program and country manager, who has been overseeing operations at Ericsson Congo since that time, said:

"Our main activity is serving our current customers: MTN, Airtel and Azur. Our priority is keeping our business partners happy and expanding in terms of network capacity and coverage within the region. Current network expansion and improving capacity are our priorities.

"The training initiative that we proposed to the government in the technology sector is to help estab-

lish technical training facilities. The idea is to support the government in the training of students in this field. We can't deny the fact it has been quite difficult to find trained people here, especially technicians in the telecoms industry.

"Even though people have basic schooling there is a huge skills gap to address. Congolese people are generally literate and fast learners, but we need to establish the infrastructure that will allow them to learn. There is a huge need for technical training, especially within our operations."

Being an English-speaking company in a Francophone country also presents its challenges.

"It becomes more difficult outside the main city and we are trying to appoint French employees to make it easier," Van Niekerk said. "Language can be a barrier, but there are always ways around it"

A hub for the region

With its unique geographical location and the current Inter-

cabling to Pointe Noire through the Central African Backbone, the telecoms chief believes Congo is on the right track in its mission to become a regional hub.

"Communications have improved significantly over the last five years; the quality is better and the general environment has improved. I have had a very positive experience working here," Van Niekerk said. "I am South African, so I appreciate the safety aspect, and I can wholeheartedly invite anyone interested in joining us; it is a very pleasant experience."

"I am sure that by 2015, there will be a big difference in the level of technology and skilled people. It will obviously continue beyond that."

Postal services

The government has also been busy setting up a State postal network. A new postal distribution center was opened in October 2011, which marked a real step forward for a country where private carriers have been the preferred—and in

some cases, the only option.

"This inauguration was a major event and is very symbolic," Minister Moun-galla said.

Companies and individuals can benefit from postal boxes now that mail is distributed. Furthermore, the Postal Bank, another of the Ministry's priorities, will be service imminently. The government is keen to facilitate credit access and a partnership with the Central Bank has been finalized in order to offer secured financial transactions.

"In fact, the postal system is rising from the ashes. The PIDEF (Programme d'Intégration et de Développement du Peuple Pygmée) program, which encourages the integration of pygmies into the community, in partnership with the UN, will bring financial commitments in order to develop post offices across the country, especially in rural zones.

"The government is keen to rebuild a social link with its people through the postal service."

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Upgrading lifestyles

Home-building, water and electricity schemes are rolled out in both cities and rural areas

All around Congo's cities there are signs of upgrading and construction work, but social housing is arguably the government's most pressing concern.

The cities of Pointe Noire, Oyo and Baongo are already benefiting from good quality new homes, and works in Brazzaville, inhabited by 70 percent of Congo's 4.2 million people, are taking place at a steady rate.

Two districts have been earmarked for social housing initiatives — Mpila and Camp 15 août—and will enjoy one-level independent homes with all modern facilities to mark a raise the country's living standards.

China's Weihai International Economic and Technical Cooperative Co Ltd, an integrated corporation authorized by the Ministry of Commerce of China to engage in foreign-oriented business, was awarded the contract to carry out the Camp 15 août construction work, where 15 homes have been built.

In Mpila, after the explosions of March 4, the area is being renovated including the reconstruction of a new high school and many buildings should be finalised in a close future.

Meanwhile, the French Development Agency is funding the extension of the road along the Congo River, the urban renovation of the Brazzaville districts Makélékélé and Baongo, and the water evacuation system of Brazzaville.

The Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa will be in charge of financing the renovation and equipment of one of the main hospitals in Brazzaville.

The country has also launched

an ambitious water, electricity and urban development project in partnership with the World Bank.

The World Bank disbursed a loan of \$125.5 million to Congo for the financing of a water, electricity and urban development project, known as Peedu.

The project is funded through the International Development Association, for \$25.5 million and by Congo to the tune of \$100 million. The government has already earmarked funds in the region of \$14 million.

When complete, the project will enable the people of Brazzaville and Pointe Noire to receive a regular distribution of drinking water and electricity. In total, more than a million people will benefit.

One of the project's major challenges concerns reforms in the

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JEAN-FÉLIX
ISSANGA PROGRAM
OFFICER ENVIRONMENT,
UNDP

water and electricity utilities. It will, however, fund urban infrastructure and help strengthen the capacities of the ministries in charge of those services, to better plan, coordinate and manage investments in order to optimize the use of national resources.

Rural development is also underway. Three Israeli companies, Oco-

mod Ltd, AB Construction and Era Optima, are involved in important projects, including the building of new agricultural villages, 1,000 accommodations in Kintélé and the national land registration.

The country is also working at a local level to set up micro-hydro-electric plants that ensure an electricity supply to the rural areas of Congo.

The micro-hydro plants project specifically targets the use of water for electricity production including, among other sources, streams and waterfalls with a capacity of less than one megawatt.

Jean-Félix Issanga of the energy program office, United Nations Development Program, said "We will do everything to ensure that, throughout the country, the Congolese people have energy and water," he said.

The project will be developed with the support of the UNDP and the Global Environmental Facility.

An independent financial organization, the GEF provides grants to developing countries and countries with economies in transition for projects that benefit the global environment, linking local, national, and global environmental challenges and promoting sustainable livelihoods.

Since approving the Congo's micro-plant project, the GEF has obtained \$2 million approved by the Board of Trustees.

Further investment to the tune of around \$18 million is also currently being negotiated with relevant departments of the African Development Bank.

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Social initiatives include the building of new one-level homes in major cities.

Special economic zones set up

Recent figures have shown that Congo's exports to China increased by 380.6 percent in the first decade of this century, demonstrating the importance of Congo's vast reserves of raw materials to the Asian powerhouse.

In turn, Congo imports rice, tobacco, cement and construction materials from China. Now, it is looking to attract Chinese businesses who can exploit its strategic location at the heart of Central Africa to set up bases within the country, and export from there to other parts of Africa.

In its bid to improve trade and investment within the region and industrialize the country, the government set up a Ministry of Special Economic Zones in 2009.

The ministry was tasked with identifying and selecting potential sites, promoting and supporting SEZ activities, defining the main legislative needs, coordinating with other ministries in regards to planning and regulation, and contributing to the SEZs development.

Attracting foreign investors, especially those from China who are experienced in implementing SEZs, and advising them of the many opportunities has been a major part of the ministry's remit.

In four years, land has been bought for one special economic zone at Pointe Noire, and feasibility studies are under way to identify sites for three more by the end of this year, at Brazzaville, Oyo-Ollombo, situated 400 kilometers north of Brazzaville and Ouesso in the north west.

In December 2011, the Minister of the SEZ, Alain Akouala Atipault, said: "We are at a turning point in the creation of these zones: the international experts are coming to start the feasibility studies."

"We will have the results within six months and then we will know what can be done to structure our economy and industrialize the country."

"By 2016, the feasibility studies will be over, the local populations will be relocated in order to free up the areas, the four zones will be fully equipped in terms of infrastructure, all the legal texts will be elaborated and adopted, we will have increased awareness toward small and medium-sized enterprises to help them develop their businesses and will gather and compile data for each SEZ."

The project is expected to cost around \$6 billion per year. There is an overall shortfall of \$6.6 billion, which the government is

looking to find.

The project will require technology, mapping, SEZ equipment and the construction of access roads, and there is already interest from an Indian company.

A triangular agreement has been signed between Congo, Mauritius and Singapore.

International expertise has been sought from China, ONUDI's delegation and the World Bank delegation.

The World Bank, which is working with the government to improve the efficiency of public spending, allocated \$10 million to this worthwhile project in February last year.

Eustache Ouayoro, World Bank country director for DR Congo, Brazzaville and Kinshasa, said:

"Congo has invested a lot of money in its infrastructures. Its investments must be beneficial and give better results."

"We acknowledge the important progress that's been made in the transport and energy sectors. Investments must continue in this direction and should be more productive."

"We have to make sure resources are sufficient to ensure the maintenance of these infrastructure."

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