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MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS, DINA PULE, HAS ONE
DRIVING VISION – THAT BY 2020 ALL SOUTH AFRICANS WILL
BE CONNECTED. THAT JOURNEY HAS JUST BEGUN.
BY KERRY DIMMER

'Communication

is a human right,' says the South African Department of Communications (DOC) Minister Dina Pule. 'This means that ICT needs to become cheaper and more accessible, and why we have aggressively begun to engage with captains of industry within the sector.'

The DOC's plan is to roll out broadband across the country by 2020. It is a huge goal, with early estimates by industry players suggesting that an investment of between R60 billion and R89 billion will be required. The DOC however, prefers to err on the side of caution and has implemented research, along with its public- and private-sector partners, to determine, among other things, a more precise figure.

'I don't want to put the cart before the horse,' says Pule. 'I want us to be at a level where we have a diagnostic report so that everyone can see where they can play a role and how we can advance the migration of various ICT platforms.'

But whatever the outcome, government on its own will not have the funds to roll out the desperately needed infrastructural development. The solution lies in continuing to build crucial relationships with the private sector, which is why the first regional International ICT Indaba, from 4–7 June in Cape Town, South Africa, is going to be a catalyst and springboard for advancing telecoms growth to the benefit of all Africans.

The indaba is just one of the mechanisms in an action plan, that for the DOC began in April with a National ICT Policy Colloquium. Six commissions came together to collectively begin the process of developing policies that will build a world-class and competitive ICT industry in South Africa. Also on the agenda was how to create employment opportunities, increase capabilities and advance research, development and innovation.

Ultimately, as a result of the toolbox in use – inclusive of the Colloquium, intense analysis and the Indaba – the DOC will most likely have, by year-end, a green paper. By 2013 a National ICT Plan should be in place, after going through all the processes that are required in policy development. Implementation is forecast for early 2014.

Since the 1970s, South Africa has positioned itself within advanced ICT and telecoms development structures, and despite recessions has weathered difficult times remarkably well.

'Global economic forces have affected local industry in different ways,' says Pule. 'But one has only to look at the acquisition of Didata by Japan's NTT for US$3.2 billion, for a clear indication that some of our companies are world class. Mark Shuttleworth too is one of the pioneers of online security, and there is locally-developed communications application MXit.

'But as government, we're not satisfied with islands of excellence in a vast cyber world, which is why we are overhauling all existing ICT policies, morphing them into progressive directives that will facilitate social development and economic growth.'

The forthcoming indaba is a crucial step forward. Not only will it provide an opportunity for local and multinational companies to showcase their products and services, but it will also provide an opportunity to push the African ICT agenda, the goal of which is to interconnect the continent.

'We want our local talent and multinationals to showcase their best products and services at the indaba,' says Pule. 'SMMEs must have a presence enabling them to explore the vast array of opportunities across Africa, which we anticipate as being

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innumerable, especially given that our counterparts in BRICS and the International Telecommunications Union have partnered with us and blessed the event.'

In one of the most anticipated events in South Africa, the DOC will be facilitating the switching on of a digital signal in September. Ultimately, analogue will be phased out by June 2015. SADC countries have agreed to use the same broadcasting standards that will allow the region to generate and share indigenous content.

The DOC is convinced that going digital is going to have a dramatic impact beyond just improved quality of picture and sound, and an increase in viewing channels – that of skills development and job opportunities. The minister expands: 'We've decided to use the process of broadcast digital migration as an opportunity to deliver on one of the government's apex priorities, that of job creation. All of the set top boxes that will be required to receive a digital signal, will therefore be manufactured locally.

'Not only will this reinvigorate the local electronics manufacturing sector, it will also give birth to new skills and create jobs along the value chain. Sales, distribution and local content production will all be boosted.

'New component manufacture and expanded communications services broadly will be enhanced, given the potential market of the entire SADC region. Call centres will be established, innovation will be encouraged and, we believe, a new investment in research and development will result.'

The digital migration process is expected to create some 200 000 new jobs, but in combination with all the other ICT developments, the DOC has committed to ensuring the creation of one million jobs by 2020. Some of those will be in rural connectivity, which is one of the DOC's main programmes. 'I look forward to the day when all our people are connected,' says Pule. 'Providing connectivity to our impoverished rural communities is a key priority, because communication facilitates development.

'Along with state-owned enterprises like Sentech and USAASA, we intend to establish a number of access centres, including community post offices and other outlets for rural people to access communication services. We want to see a communications environment that will facilitate more affordable acquisition of smart phones, so that all people can afford to download and access data.'

Further, improved telecoms is going to play a crucial role in the delivery of essential services, such as the health sector. Pule says that by capturing a patient's medical history onto a database that is linked to all other health centres, doctors and other health professionals will be able to more easily determine if a patient is receiving appropriate medical attention. 'They'll also be able to confirm whether a patient is collecting medication and make the necessary interventions should they not be doing so.

'The use of telemedicine will enable doctors to treat patients who are at clinics located far from the doctor's own base. It is the delivery of essential services like this, that are going to significantly change the way basic needs are delivered and addressed across the continent.'

By her own admission Pule is not a technical person. 'I'm a politician and a government representative and not trained in telecoms. But during the year I spent in 2009–10 as deputy minister of Communications, I gained enormous insights into, and an understanding of, the challenges that our government faces in leading and regulating this industry. That term of office really opened my eyes to the communication services gaps in our country, which has only made me more proud and excited to now lead and work with the dedicated professionals in the department to help bridge the digital divide by taking more South Africans into the digital and knowledge economy.'