

Africa's demand for fibre surges in 2017

The priority for the telecoms industry in 2017 in Africa should be to accelerate deployment of true broadband services so that African users can benefit from the full power of the internet.



Suveer Ramdhani, chief development officer at Seacom

Africa is on the cusp of a fibre and mobile broadband boom as network operators scramble to meet the demand for video, cloud applications and mobile solutions among consumers and businesses, said Suveer Ramdhani, chief development officer at Seacom.

“In Africa, we have seen some progress in increasing internet penetration, but the goalposts keep shifting. Many, perhaps even most, internet connections on the continent are sub-1Mbps connections that do not meet the insatiable demand among businesses and consumers for fast and plentiful bandwidth,” he said.

In Africa, one major factor driving demand for high-performance bandwidth is a growing and youthful population that sees connectivity as a fundamental right, he added. For them, broadband spells access to educational, economic and social opportunities. Mobile broadband has an important role to play, but fibre-based fixed-line infrastructure is also vitally important in connecting mobile towers and giving users affordable last-mile access to high-speed services.

Mobile-first

“Research from *We Are Social* indicates that that 75% of webpages served to web browsers in South Africa are served to mobile devices,” said Ramdhani. “Across Africa, people spend most of their time online using mobile devices because of the world’s shift towards mobility and because it is the only affordable or available means of connecting to the internet in many regions.”

However, the way that people use the internet on a mobile device is different to how they use their fixed-line connections. They use their smartphones for social networking, messaging, entertainment and utility, while desktop users do more data-intensive tasks such as file sharing and video streaming.

Another factor is the rapid rise of video. Data from Cisco shows that video accounted for nearly 58% of data consumption in South Africa in 2015, for example, which is expected to rise to 71% by 2020. Streaming video services such as Netflix and ShowMax will be a major reason for this growth, Ramdhani said.

In the business market, there is growing demand for cloud computing services such as those provided by Amazon, Microsoft, Google, Salesforce.com and a range of African service providers, he added. Many African organisations are embracing the cloud to fast-track modernisation of their IT infrastructures.

“With the trends towards higher video consumption and cloud computing, users will need to find their way back to a fixed-line connection,” said Ramdhani. “Mobile operators will need to look at their business models and decide whether they will evolve them to capture all of our data spend or whether they will continue to provide relatively expensive services for niche mobile use.”

Ecosystem

Ramdhani said that many elements of the ecosystem have come together in Africa for a boom in high-speed internet access. For example, an explosion in local data centres and deployment of content caches has brought global content closer to the end-user, improving the experience dramatically.

In addition, open-access infrastructure players have reduced barriers to entry for innovative service providers, meaning that fibre to the business and home is becoming increasingly viable in African metropolitan regions.

“There is city-to-city fibre and in rings around the cities, but not enough to businesses’ and consumers’ doorsteps,” Ramdhani said. “Changing this is a priority for Seacom this year.”

Seacom is also focusing on connecting into more countries as backhaul is economically viable and expanding its ring around Africa with aspirations to the West. “With such low broadband penetrations and with such high demand for data volumes, the growth possibilities are tremendous,” concluded Ramdhani.

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