

The disconnected continent

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The IDC market outlook for Africa underscores the value of connectivity, the importance of ICT and the need to be more prepared when it comes to digital.



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The world has been caught off guard. The pandemic. It is in every conversation, sits at every board room table (video conference), and defines how continent and country look to an uncertain future. The pandemic is just one of the factors influencing Africa and the ICT markets.

The lack of connectivity across the continent is a huge contributor to Africa lacking the preparedness it needs step over the impact of Covid-19 and into a more digitally transformed future. The virus, and the subsequent lockdowns to curb the impact of the virus, have highlighted how wide the digital divide is on the continent.

The chasm is gaping. Not just in terms of connectivity, but also infrastructure, digitisation, investment into technology, and a lack of willingness to embrace digital transformation. The resistance that many organisations felt has proven futile. They have instead been thrust into digital transformation to survive the lockdowns and the virus. They have been forced to invest in ICT to ensure that they can connect to customers and employees. And they have been struggling.

We have seen many organisations struggle to maintain productivity over the past few months because they didn't enable their workforces to work remotely. This has slowed their ability to cope under mounting economic and market pressure. Unfortunately, their access to the tools and technologies they needed to make remote working and digital a reality was restricted. ICT supply chains were severely hampered by restrictions on imports.

The supply chain was brought to a bottlenecked crawl throughout the lockdown – many areas are still struggling to match demand. For companies that had limited work from home solutions such as mobile devices or laptops, this meant that their businesses effectively ground to a halt.

Still a long way to go

The situation has highlighted that there is still a long way to go to improve ICT on the continent. There's a need for increased broadband connectivity across the continent. Post-lockdown, people will be more comfortable being at home than outdoors or at work, and the technology needs to cater for this. The organisation must cater for this. Therefore, we predict that the hybrid work environment will become the norm, even when lockdown restrictions are eased.

Initially, the increased infrastructure demands from the consumer will be met with limited supply. This is a clear challenge for the continent. Mobile connectivity devices such as laptops and tablets will be in demand to support remote working and homeschooling, but the supply chain will remain in a bottleneck for a while. But it is not all doom and town crier gloom.

We have seen continued investment into the continent with the recent announcement of the 2Africa undersea cable in collaboration with China Mobile International, Facebook, MTN GlobalConnect, Orange, STC, Telecom Egypt, Vodafone, and WIOCC.

While the revenues may have decreased, we have seen drastic increases in traffic volumes. Also, as most of the regulations have been relaxed during the pandemic, there has been an immense benefit. Such as the temporary allocation of the spectrum after more than 10 years."

As the continent looks ahead, the road is bumpy and not without challenges. Africa not only has to deal with legacy issues across infrastructure and connectivity, but it is doing so within the maelstrom of the pandemic. On one hand, the virus is a global experience – economic instability and digital transformation complexity are not limited to Africa, the world is on a learning curve. On the other, Africa needs to use this as an opportunity to do one thing that it is good at – leapfrog.

It is now more urgent than ever to get the continent connected and services reaching end-users at comfortable price points.

Now is the time to embed sustainable change so that Africa is not left behind, but rather rising out of the pandemic alongside the other countries and continents."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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