

OPINION AND ANALYSIS

Failure to Launch: South Africa's lost ground in the quest for African ICT influence

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IN MANY quarters, South Africa is considered a leading player on the African continent. Indeed, its brand messaging and the way it appears to position itself in international forums indicate its desire to lead. However, its status on the continent is currently in free fall. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of Information Communications and Technology (ICT).

A decade ago, South Africa, was the undisputed African ICT hub. It had everything in its favour: infrastructure, human capital, an amiable policy environment and an excitement that caused investors to flock to the country. Fast-forward a few years and South Africa has begun to lag in this area to the extent that Kenya has overtaken it. The Kenyans have been more successful than the South Africans in mainstreaming ICT products for public and private service. The most famous being M-Pesa: a financial application that deals with money transfers and micro financing. Nigeria is fast on Kenya's heels with the its upgrading of its ICT infrastructure, which is further bolstered by China's Exim Bank investing millions of dollars.

So, what is going wrong with South Africa when it comes to ICT? To a large degree it comes down to the lack of political will to bring the overall vision for South Africa to fruition. Policies and plans have been developed, and published, but the follow through is not what one would expect. Internal institutional politics is a major stumbling block when it comes to bringing life to policies.

The ICT sector was originally overseen by the Department of Communications. The top leadership changed six times (once owing to death) from 1999 to 2014. Within that period much of the great ideas and work that had been scheduled, did not see the light of day. Perhaps as a move to deal with this challenge, President Zuma split the Communications department and created a new department: The Department of Telecommunications and Postal services. The new Department

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has been unable to impact the ICT sector significantly since its inception, perhaps owing to the fact that it does not own its own budget. The budget still resides within the control of the Department of Communication. Furthermore, there seems to be a blockage with regards to achieving its mandate.

The National Broadband Advisory Council was developed to assist in meeting the South African Connect deadline, but the Minister of telecommunications did not attend the initial meetings of the Council. This was a huge misstep on his part, and the part of his advisory team, because his attendance would have given the council the gravitas it needs to enact its role successfully. Unless, they are trying to cause the Council to be still born for a reason that has yet come to light.

This apparent lack of political will also has meant that South Africa has missed key opportunities to leverage its global political standing. The major example is that of the International Telecommunications Union plenipotentiary conference that took place for three weeks between the 20 October and the 7 November 2014. This is a very important conference because it is a major elective conference and charts the course for Internet governance. This conference would have been an opportunity for South Africa to not only enter beneficial agreements, but it would have also been a great chance to establish itself as a key player in the realm of ICT. Despite the importance of this meeting, the country did not send more people with gravitas to support Minister Cwele and his delegation. Compare this to the United States for example, who had the Secretary of State, John Kerry, heading their delegation. The message the US sends is that we are here to be felt and we are here for business.

South Africa failed to get elected to the ITU and failed to make any impact at the conference. It is clear that the problem stems from deeper than Minister Cwele's appointment. He is a highly qualified and intelligent person. If its incorrect to surmise that lack of political will is holding the country back then our political elite have to be more forthright as to what is holding them back. Identifying the root causes of failure, as well as weeding them out, would provide fertile ground for South Africa to meet its potential.