

Minister of Communications Dr. Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri highlighted delivery by the Department of Communications (DoC) with regard to national priorities and implementation during this year's budget vote speech.

Matsepe-Casaburri said although the DoC is charged with leading the development of the ICT sector in South Africa, the ICT sector cuts across different sectors thus making it essential for the DoC to work with others to achieve ICT goals as a country.

"This year, being the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Charter, our departmental delivery is therefore underpinned by some of the Charter principles such as "South Africa belongs to all of us", so that as we address issues of access and bridging the digital divide, we indeed work towards ensuring that South Africa belongs to all and not only some of us."

The Minister announced seven under serviced area licensees (USALs) who will assist in accelerating the development of the economy and the building of the Information Society in KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Free State and North West. Some of these licences are 60-70 percent owned by women and ordinary communities.

Fourteen more licences are being applied for this year in these and other provinces. These licences are expected to improve not only access to ICTs by citizens but also to expand services by government such as health, education, safety, security and welfare.

Matsepe-Casaburri said further liberalisation of the telecommunications sector is on course since September 2004 through new directives aimed at removing the legal requirement for all operators and service providers to use Telkom infrastructure and that progress has been made with the licensing of the Second National Operator (SNO).

"The Convergence Bill is currently serving in parliament. Its enactment will place South

Africa among the world's leading countries in the development of the Information Society.

"In line with government policy, the SABC has already made applications for two regional broadcasting services to meet our provincial and language needs. After re-positioning itself, the participation of the Post Bank in the Mzansi Account has been very successful. The Post Bank has already overtaken the four major banks with 152 thousand accounts opened, which is 29 percent of the total market share."

However, the Minister warned the modernisation of ICT infrastructure is essential to achieving higher rates of investment in the economy.

"In my speech last year, I indicated the plan to migrate our broadcasting system from analogue to digital thus enabling us to have a better capacity to provide more diversity of services, especially broadcasting in all our languages, thus ensuring that South Africans are provided with a high degree of local broadcasting content, universal service as well as better and more service offerings.

"This migration is complex and has to take into account the technical, economic, and social aspects of moving from one system to another. It also requires agreements on frequency co-ordination between countries and frequency allocations within countries.

South Africa belongs to all of us

**Dr. Ivy
Masepe-
Casaburri**



“Given the fact that the migration of broadcasting systems from analogue to digital will have a far-reaching impact in South Africa and poses many challenges for the broadcasting system as a whole, I hereby announce my intention to establish a Digital Broadcasting Migration Working Group comprised of representatives from the industry, the regulator, consumers, business and Government.”

Inputs to and the report from the Digital Broadcasting Migration Working Group will culminate in a National Strategy for the migration of broadcasting systems from analogue to digital.

According to the Minister, the take-up of broadband, which can contribute significantly to higher rates of investment, has been

relatively slow in South Africa. Like in many countries the world over, even where the infrastructure is available and the cost seemingly affordable, the use for broadband has tended to be sluggish.

“Access to broadband is also crucial for achieving socioeconomic development goals especially for the provision of public services such as e-learning, e-health and e-government. Accordingly my department is leading other relevant departments to address the question of increasing both the affordable access to and use of broadband.”

Matsepe-Casaburri stressed that increasing the competitiveness of the South African economy involves, among others, lowering the cost to communicate.

In view of the President's directive to make South Africa more competitive and investor-friendly by reducing the cost of doing business and that, affordability of telecommunications by the general public has also been identified as an important element, the DoC is leading work aimed at developing new policy directives focused on these matters.

“The availability of a broad ICT skills base is another prerequisite for the competitiveness of any economy in today's increasingly globalizing world. In this context, the principle embodied in the Freedom Charter, which states that “the doors of learning and culture shall be opened”, could not be more relevant.”

The Minister reported the launch of the African Advanced Institute of Information and Communication Technologies (AAICT), to be known as the Meraka Institute.

“This institute will focus on technology research, Applications innovation and Human capital development. The Meraka Institute will incorporate some elements of the Institute for Satellite and Software Applications (ISSA) and the National Electronic Media Institute of South Africa (NEMISA). Research embarked upon will also include a focus on affordable universal design technologies that address the needs of differently-abled people as a norm, not an exception.

“In addition we will be work-

ing in partnership with the State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and the Sector Education Training Authorities (SETAs) to increase learnership programmes in the ICT sector."

The Minister warned that one of the biggest challenges we face as a country is to broaden participation in the economy.

"The ICT BEE Charter attempts to achieve this. Despite delays, we have gained experience from our democratic negotiations since 1990 and successfully negotiated the BEE Charter for the ICT sector in an inclusive and participatory manner.

"In taking our charter process toward the code of good practice, we will dialogue with social partners to discuss the changing nature of the sector and find appropriate sector strategies to meet the new challenges that our economy faces especially regarding the re-skilling and reorganization of labour."

The Minister informed that dialogue with progressive micro-finance institutions was also necessary to ensure not only micro-finance access to the poor, but also reducing cost of access to services, and transactional costs.

"In this regard we intend to work with other departments in matters such as consumer protection, delivery of government services and products, because affordable finance is a key constraint for micro enterprises survival.

"This year in particular, the capacity of the state to deliver on its mandate is receiving long overdue attention from government.

"In this regard the Doc has invited the ICT SOEs and other government departments to a joint strategic planning session in order to ensure the alignment of service delivery with the government Programme of Action – a first of its kind."

According to Matsepe-Casaburri, the strengthening of sector regulators is one of the areas that has been identified as a priority by government.

"The ICASA Act is being amended to make the regulator more responsive to the needs of and developments in the ICT sector. This includes the transfer of the postal regulator from the department to ICASA. In view of envisaged increased responsibilities of the regulator and its competition with industry for a limited pool of highly skilled staff, the funding of the regulator is now receiving urgent attention."

The Minister notified that to anchor the country's democracy, the DoC, together with the Government Communications Information System (GCIS), launched the satellite network based channel to give direct access for community radio stations to parliamentary and government information.

"This will deepen our democracy as it will provide unmediated information to ordinary people thus giving them a tool to make more informed decisions about their lives.

"We are working with other Minister's on the continent in operationalizing the African Union (AU) Technical Committee responsible for ICTs. Our NEPAD ICT programme is well advanced. One of our first and most ambitious projects in which we are working with the department of education– the NEPAD e-schools project - managed under the NEPAD e-Africa Commission has been launched. Six South African schools will be participating as part of the first phase of fifteen countries."