

Analogue to digital switchover in Africa process marooned

The International Telecommunication Union set a 17 June 2015 deadline for most sub-Saharan African countries to make the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting.



Source: © Oleksandr Pldvalnyi [pexels](#) The digital switchover process from analogue to digital TV has marooned in Africa

Russell Southwood, of *Balancing Act* has tracked the progress of the switchover for over a decade and a half, looks at where things are now and why so little progress has been made in this [In Brief article](#).

In previous reviews of where African countries have got to with the digital switch over, *Balancing Act* has used slightly different categories.

In the early days, there seemed to be a logical route that involved writing a policy, gathering the stakeholders together and setting a timeline to completion. But as the years have gone by, doing things in this way seems to have gone out of the window.

Current status of Digital Switchover in Sub-Saharan Africa countries:

- Not yet started (countries like Central African Republic and Somalia): 10
- Started but status unclear (announcements have been made but practical action may not have happened): 19

- Started and progress made (these vary from those who have done some practical work to several nearing completion): 11
- Completed the process (for example, Mauritius, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. The gap between announcements is often long: Ethiopia first said it was going to work with GatesAir in 2015 but did not actually sign the contract until 2020: 9

It is clear that there are more countries that are some way from completing than have a process underway. Those that have already completed took up to five years to complete the process. It's a marathon, not a sprint, so there will be no last-minute rush to complete.

What digital switchover requires

The digital switchover process requires many of the things that African governments are bad at. It requires setting policy goals and doing so with both broadcasters and citizens. It needs government to keep its foot on the accelerator pedal and make it a political priority.

It needs money that doesn't already exist to be found to finance the process. It requires an efficient mechanism (either public or private) to run the broadcast signal carrier.

It needs government to communicate why someone should buy a new set-top box: what are the benefits?

Most African governments have signally failed to meet these requirements. It has been a test of whether Governments can get things done and most have failed the test.



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Changing circumstances

When the digital switchover was first presented, it was a case, in most countries, of simply replacing an analogue transmission infrastructure with a digital one. Today, 17 years later, after several deadline extensions from the ITU, the challenges faced by the process are much more complicated: things have changed.

The number of Africans accessing video content by internet has increased enormously. Whether it's through YouTube, Facebook or TikTok, young Africans are not always turning to television for the content they want. Some countries (particularly those close to the Middle East) have always been satellite territories.

The number of countries going this route is increasing. SES has successfully promoted satellite as a platform in Ghana and Ethiopia and signed a contract to help with the switchover in Benin. Other satellite providers have also signed up to provide geographic 'fill-in' contracts.

Infrastructure costs

DTT transmission infrastructure is a major capital commitment and African broadcasters are unlikely to be able to cover all of the costs. A country like Liberia might more easily and efficiently get nationwide broadcast signal coverage from a satellite rather than terrestrial infrastructure.

Indeed it has been the cost of the infrastructure that has proved a major barrier to many countries. The Chinese pay-TV provider *StarTimes* has often stepped into the role of both initiator and executor of the process. The costs have then been

covered by the ExIm Bank of China. *StarTimes* has sometimes bartered its contribution for access to channels for its pay-TV bouquets.

There have been other routes and in some instances, they seem to have been cheaper to deliver.

Cost to the citizen

There have been controversies in both Ghana and South Africa over the government trying to impose conditional access on the set-top boxes. The public licensing model works very badly in poorer countries and conditional access might well lead to a 'pay-for' public broadcasting.

Few countries gave much consideration to the cost to the citizen, particularly to poorer households. When the process was completed in Tanzania, there were a significant number of people who no longer had access to television viewing.

In South Africa, there are currently court actions by those wanting to slow down the process, who are pointing out that the same thing is happening there.



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The winners

But where the process has been completed, the viewers have been the winners. In almost all countries it has increased the number of channels available to viewers and in most of those that have completed, it has expanded the transmission area, increasing the number of TV viewers. But only a very small number of countries actually made this a policy goal of the whole process.

A marooned switchover process

Now the digital switchover process is marooned. There is no overriding pressure on politicians to get things done. So whilst African politicians far and wide are talking 'digital transformation', they have not yet realised that the spectrum the switchover process promised to deliver and has not yet done so in many countries, is vital for 4G and now 5G.

In October this year, the mobile operators' trade body, the GSMA published a report (*Digital Switchover in Sub-Saharan African Countries*) pointing out the obvious: "Further, as more users adopt mobile services, and as 4G and 5G services develop in the region, additional spectral resources will be required."

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