



# Zimbabwe: Telcom prices limit freedom of expression

MISA Zimbabwe has found the state of fixed and mobile telephone networks in Zimbabwe appalling, stating that rising prices of telephone services limits communication and freedom of expression.

MISA Zimbabwe believes the sole fixed telephone network, run by the state-owned company TelOne, is in an appalling state of affairs with erratic coverage in urban areas and being virtually non-existent in rural areas. This has inadvertently led to a major increase in the use of mobile telephones by the majority of Zimbabweans from all socio-economic and geographic backgrounds. The three mobile telephone networks (Econet Wireless, Telecel, and the state-owned Net One) have, however, failed to cope with the market demand for their services in Zimbabwe's hyperinflationary environment.

On 6 November 2008, Econet Wireless published a statement in the local print media withdrawing its contract line services for clients under the Business Partners scheme as of 10 November, a move which has left thousands of Zimbabweans deprived of their right to communicate. Other mobile service providers and affiliated service companies, in tandem with Econet Wireless, have increased tariffs, with the average cost of a text message having risen from approximately ZW\$1000 (approx. US\$0.28) to at least ZW\$20,000 (approx. US\$5.65), an increase of 2000%.

It is MISA Zimbabwe's considered position that this state of affairs in the telecommunications industry is a serious impediment to the right of the people of Zimbabwe to communicate; as well as their right to freedom of expression as guaranteed in Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. This right includes the ability to use and access tools of communication such as the internet, fixed telephones and mobile telephone networks by ordinary people, as emphasised by the World Summit on Information Societies (WSIS) held in Tunis, Tunisia 2005.

In light of these universally accepted principles, MISA Zimbabwe urges the fixed and mobile telephone service providers as well as the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) to act with the full understanding that communication is a human right and not a privilege.

MISA has emphasised that whilst the Zimbabwe national economy remains unpredictable, telecommunications remain a key pillar of freedom of expression and access to information the world over. To therefore unilaterally increase tariffs without consulting members of the public or carrying out public sector surveys of the importance of communication to the people of Zimbabwe in times of social and economic strife is to act in contradiction of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to ignore the WSIS principles established under the auspices of the International Telecommunications Union which outline that all forms of communication, especially ICTs, must be geared towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

MISA Zimbabwe has urged all of the fixed and mobile telephone network providers to reconsider their position, if they are to be seen as corporations with an understanding of corporate social responsibility.

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