

ICT Ministers head to Malawi to ease up EASSy



By [David Kezio-Musoke](#)

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ICT ministers from 20 African countries will gather in Malawi to thrash out areas of disagreement regarding the construction of the Eastern Africa Sub-Marine Cable System (EASSy).

Ministers of ICTs from about 20 African countries have been invited for a special meeting that is expected to iron out controversies surrounding the ratification of the NEPAD ICT broadband network (NIBN) project.

The project includes the EASSy project and Central Corridor Trade and Transport Facilitation Project.

Trying to make it EASSyer

Rwandan state Minister for Energy and communications Eng. Albert Butare told HANA that ministers are expected to meet in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi by the end of June to try and reach a consensus on whether the project can proceed without some member countries signing the protocol.

The ratification for NIBN should be completed by 30 June 2007, according to the project time schedule.

There are currently disputes and no working consensus among some members over ownership of the US\$280 million broadband infrastructure.

"The coming together of all member countries including those that have not yet appended signature on the protocol for the establishment of the special purpose vehicle to own and manage the system," Butare said.

"This meeting will give room for the tabling of discussions and provision of concrete solutions to difficulties in this project," he added.

A special purpose vehicle will be a body corporate created by all EASSy members to fulfill narrow, specific or temporary objectives, primarily to isolate financial risk, which usually could include bankruptcy and some other specific taxation or regulatory risks.

The sign off

Dr. Edmund Katiti, the NEPAD Policy and Regulator Advisor said during a ministerial conference on the multi-million dollar broadband network held in Kigali recently, that countries that have not signed may accede to the protocol once it has come

into effect.

"Eleven countries including Kenya have not yet signed the protocol, citing widespread irregularities in regulatory framework," Katiti said.

Kenya declared the protocol illegal as it commits the signatories to modify their regulatory framework to accommodate the provisions thereby overriding the nations' laws and over ruling all regulatory agreements in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Kenya argued that it cannot allow going back to the era of monopoly and controls due to a poorly designed protocol.

At the first protocol signing in Kigali, only seven countries, namely Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi and Tanzania, signed.

The NEPAD e-Africa commission that is spearheading the venture has announced that the eleven countries including Kenya that have not signed the protocol risk being thrown out of the project.

Dr Henry Chasia, the Deputy Executive Chairperson of the NEPAD e-Africa Commission, said the countries that have not signed won't do so until the critical mass required for the project to take off has been achieved.

In February, Chasia told HANA journalists in Pretoria, South Africa that countries that have already signed the protocol had agreed to all conditions and had been asked to nominate companies that would invest in the project - an event that nominated 12 companies out of the required 60.

With the Malawi meeting, Rwanda's Butare expressed optimism that all member countries will put an end to the on-going wrangles that have crippled the progress of the sub-marine cable system as well as forge a way forward on its quick implementation.

The Malawi meeting follows another meeting of ICT ministers which was held in April in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania which agreed to open dialogue for all member countries.

The 9,900km EASSy network is to be built on Dense Wavelength Division Multiplexing Technology and is an initiative to connect countries of eastern and southern Africa via a high bandwidth fibre optic cable system to the rest of the world.

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ABOUT DAVID KEZIO-MUSOKE

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