**East Africa needs a fair entry-ticket to afford cyberspace: Easing Access to EASSy**

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa -- Africa currently has to pay for some of the most expensive bandwidth in the world. The region currently only has one major international fibre cable (SAT3) that connects countries in West and Southern Africa but East Africa has no fibre connection. Fibre connections usually mean cheaper prices than satellite for volume traffic but because of the monopoly structure of the SAT3 consortium, its operators have kept prices high.

All this will change if the proposed East African Submarine Cable System (EASSy) cable is built as it will connect countries on the eastern side of the continent and if this new capacity is offered in a way that maximises use and lowers price.

To help make this possible, APC is launching a new website "Fibre-for-Africa" and on March 10 will hold a consultation with more than 80 key stakeholders from all over Eastern and Southern Africa to ensure that access to EASSy -which will serve eight coastal and eleven land-locked countries- is 'easy', affordable and open.

Fibre-for-Africa http://www.fibreforafrica.net provides background information, analysis and news on EASSy and SAT3 and on general bandwidth issues in Africa.

The consultation takes place on March 10, at the Indian Ocean Beach Hotel, Mombasa, Kenya. This one-day event is convened by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), Balancing Act, Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) and Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTANET).

**SIGNIFICANT BARRIER**
The price of international bandwidth is still a significant barrier to the region's development. It makes it more expensive to do business. For example, it is harder for new call centres to compete with their global competitors. In terms of its social development, there are many areas where cheap international access would give East African citizens, professionals, students and decision-makers access to knowledge, expertise and involvement in regional and global discussions.

"The cost of international bandwidth almost certainly directly affects how Africa works; whether through the high cost of international calls -particularly to other African countries- or through the cost and speed of the continent's internet connection," says APC executive director Anriette Esterhuysen.

**OPEN AND AFFORDABLE?**
The EASSy consortium has been set up to build a fibre route that will connect countries on the east coast of Africa. But its governance and the terms under which access to the new capacity will be available have not yet been set. This project is at a crossroads: it can either follow the monopoly practices of its predecessor SAT3 or offer an open access regime, that will increase competition and lower prices, and give consideration to development needs.

The aim of the Mombasa consultation and the "Fibre-for-Africa" website is to promote transparency - the investors in the cable have been less than open about how they are going to run it- and the notion that internet backbone needs to be regulated as a public good and from a public interest perspective. "Interest in the event has been incredible, " observes Anriette Esterhuysen. "We had invited 40 people, now there are 80 confirmed - this is such a serious issue for the region."

"If SAT3 and the EASSy cable carry on being run as a club consortium, the cost of international bandwidth will be kept high," says APC's Communications and Information Policy Programme Manager Willie Currie.

Currie argues that this would "continue to deprive Africa of the advantages of being cheaply connected to the international internet -- a platform for multiple forms of collaboration - cultural, economic and political."

WWW.APC.ORG

## INFLATED COSTS

Russell Southwood, CEO of Balancing Act, says that the high costs of the SAT3 cable set a bad precedent for the EASSy project to follow. "Rates on SAT3 have been as high as US$25,000 per mbps per month but are now around US$10-15,000. The actual cost to the operator is around US$2,000. These are very large margins. High prices mean that there are a significant number of countries where the full capacity of the cable has not been used. Fibre cables last for 25 years and are therefore a wasting asset from day one unless a large part of their capacity is used. EASSy needs to produce prices and terms of access that will ensure this."

Brian Longwe of the African ISP Association (AfrISPA) and KICTANET says, "Time has come for Africa's internet community to take their futures –-and livelihoods-- into their own hands. For too long Africa has been dependent on overseas infrastructure and facilities to provide inter-country -and sometimes intra-country- connectivity."

## THE CONSULTATION

Convened by KICTANET, CIPESA, Balancing Act and APC, the consultation will provide a briefing on EASSY followed by a debate of the key issues and the questions that still need answering.

On the morning of March 10, Vincent Waiswa Bagiire of CIPESA will make his opening remarks, followed by a panel discussion on key EASSy issues, chaired by Florence Etta of KICTANET.

Panellists will zero in on how the availability of international bandwidth from the EASSy cable will help change the work they do, or help consumers. They will also raise issues of concern like pricing, access to capacity, transparency, governance and equity.

Later in the morning, discussion will shift to the meaning of 'open access' for EASSy, with particularly reference to the experience of the SAT3 consortium in West and Southern Africa. Canadian development organisation IDRC's Edith Adera will chair.

This session will offer an update on the EASSy project; the history of Africa's other international fibre project, SAT3; the issues raised by monopoly access, pricing strategy, transparency and the impact on users; and ways these issues have been tackled in Africa and elsewhere in the 'developing' world.

APC's Willie Currie will look at what fibre infrastructure is being built for Africa, while Balancing Act CEO Russell Southwood will talk about how fibre monopolies affect access, pricing, and open versus closed approaches. Zolisa Masiza of ICASA, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa, will discuss how regulators can respond to the challenge of ensuring a level playing-field.

There will be short presentations on key issues by EASSy consortium members and other interested parties. The meeting closes with a plenary session, chaired by Dr. Francis Tusubira from Makerere University, to discuss how issues of concern might be taken forward with Government, regulators and the EASSy consortium itself.

The event is possible thanks to support provided by the APC, the UK Department for International Development (DFID), Infodev, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Open Society Institute (OSI).

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Fibre-for-Africa: www.fibreforafrica.net
Email: openaccess @ apc.org
Fibre-for-Africa provides background information, analysis and news on EASSy and SAT3 and on general bandwidth issues in Africa. Visit the site and use the public forum to say your say about affordable bandwidth for Africa.

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## ABOUT APC

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is an international network of civil society organisations dedicated to empowering and supporting groups and individuals through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially internet-related technologies.
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