Have your say on Spectrum Policy

Through the recently gazetted proposed Spectrum Policy, government seeks to lower communication costs and bridge the connectivity divide that results in the exclusion of citizens from rural areas and under-served communities in the country.

Image source: Miguel Á. Padriñán from Pexels

Addressing members of the media on Thursday, Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies, Khumbudzo Ntshavheni, said the policy also promotes small, medium and micro-enterprise (SMME) participation and emergence of new entrants to the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector.

It is also expected to speed up the rollout of new technologies, such as fifth-generation (5G) technology.

"South Africa is faced with shortage and limitations on availability of spectrum. For South Africa to realize its objectives of digital everything such as digital economy, digital citizenry etc, we need to ensure that citizens can afford access to data, which will allow them to access the digital infrastructure platforms hence our commitment to drive down the high cost to communicate.

"This can only happen if we have a spectrum policy, which permits or support flexibility and timely release of spectrum for use. Through making spectrum available for use timeously, government expects to continuously address the high cost to communicate experienced by South Africa," the Minister said.

Ntshavheni said South Africa continues to experience connectivity divide resulting in perpetual exclusion of rural, remote and underserved communities in the country.

"By making spectrum available, we will enable the telecommunications sector to build resilient networks in all geographic locations of our country. Our commitment of economic inclusion through the participation of SMMEs in the ICT sector remains a priority.

"While we acknowledge that due to limitations in spectrum, it is not possible to license spectrum to all more than 400 ECNS and ECS license holders, of which majority are SMMEs, we must however continue with measures, which will ensure that ultimately SMMEs are included in the ICT sector, including on access to spectrum," she said.

This Policy further supports the deployment and licensing of alternative infrastructure networks such as Wi-Fi and community networks as of extending access to spectrum.

"It also supports the introduction of spectrum for the state digital infrastructure company, which will aid in bridging the connectivity divide and the digital divide through facilitating SMME participation in the sector.

"Therefore, the intention is to create a policy framework that streamlines and eliminates any regulatory requirements that may impede the viability and sustainability for all who must participate in this sector," the Minister said.

Ntshavheni said the country continues to experience shortage in allocation of spectrum for mobile services.

"We will therefore continue to actively advance and defend South Africa's spectrum use in international fora, including advocating for additional spectrum allocation through the release of spectrum for International Mobile Telecommunications (IMT) in other bands," the Minister said.

In addition to this, the government will continue to facilitate efficient utilisation of spectrum in order to benefit from the adoption of the latest and most advanced technologies such as 5G and others.

"Acknowledging that spectrum is a finite resource, the adoption of more advanced technologies for economic growth must be matched by a deliberate programme to retire old technologies to ensure more spectrum is made available for the country to achieve our objective of offering all South Africans high-speed broadband.

"Thus, this policy proposes sunset of 2G and 3G networks with the aim of availing more spectrum to support deployments of 5G and beyond.

"Further, this policy supports the release of a roadmap for 4G and 5G, which will be finalised in consultation with the regulator, and the mobile network operators (MNO)," she said.

This will ensure that citizens, including those in rural and remote areas are not excluded or left out in the rollout of latest and emerging technologies.

The draft Next Generation Spectrum Policy, Government Gazette No: 46873, has been published inviting interested persons to submit written submissions in relation to the spectrum policy in not less than 30 days from 1 September 2020 date of the notice.