

Promise Tracker

New special report. The Promise Tracker is Daily Monitor's weekly special feature that will track the promises made by leaders of all categories as well as public agencies to the people. The aim is to cause accountability, show status and analyse whether it was a realistic, unrealistic or empty promise.

Uganda in 7-year wait for ICT parks



Promotion. Ms Zindziswa Mandela, the South African ambassador to Denmark, joins the Mama Africa entertainment group during the launch of the Technology Innovation Centre in Masese, Jinja District last year.

BY ISAAC MUFUMBA
imufumba@sug.nationmedia.com

THE PROMISE:

Point No. 7 on a 12-point information communication technology to-do list laid out in the ruling National Resistance Movement's 2011 campaign manifesto is the establishment of ICT parks in various parts of the country. "The NRM shall undertake the following in the next five years... establish Information Technology parks for promoting ICT software and hardware development industry," the manifesto reads in parts. ICT parks are akin to industrial parks. They are designated areas for housing ICT-related firms and are equipped with infrastructure for high speed communication. This particular promise was made after two debacles that had seen pieces of prime land given away to two different sets of investors who had all promised to make ICT-related investments. The first was in October 2006 when President Museveni directed that 50 acres of land in Kampala Industrial Business Park in Namanve be given out for free to set up what was meant

to be the first computer and mobile phones factory in East and Central Africa. The investment turned out to be a mockery and the land worth \$2.1 million (approximately Shs7.6 billion) was sold off in controversial circumstances. Similarly, in August 2010, Lake Victoria Information Communication Technology and Bio-Technology (LAVIT) announced that it would open up a \$200million (approximately Shs720billion) ICT park in Jinja. The project, which was meant to be situated on land which also houses Kirinya prison, was subsequently allocated to it, but the project has never taken off. In the manifesto it is stated that the parks that the NRM government would set up were meant to be a follow up on what had been achieved in the area of communication since 1986 when Mr Museveni came to power. "The liberalisation of the telecommunications sector and formation of the Ministry of ICT has greatly guided the sector into the leading contributor to the country's GDP. The effective dual use of ICT has become

11.8 million

Unemployed. Number of youth, many of whom are graduates of universities and tertiary institutions, are either unemployed or simply find it difficult to get job placements, according to the 2014 National Housing and Population Census.

a very critical factor for rapid economic growth and wealth creation, and for improving the livelihoods of the world's poor," the manifesto reads in parts. Some of the achievements that the party boasted of included the liberalisation of the telecoms sector, which not only broke the monopoly that the Uganda Posts and Telecommunications Limited (UPTL) used to enjoy, but also saw the government parastatal broken into three to create Posta Uganda, Post Bank and Uganda Telecommunication. The liberalisation also allowed for the entry of other operators such as MTN Uganda, Celtel (now Airtel) and Orange Uganda (now Africel).

According to the manifesto, since the entrance of the private players and the introduction of cellular services, telephone subscription has increased from around 2.2 million people in 2006 to 11 million people in 2011. The party further boasted that deliberate policies aimed at increasing ICT coverage had resulted into several developments like all districts and major trading centres being covered in terms of voice and data connectivity and availability of internet Points of Presence (POPs) in more than two thirds of the country. It also boasted that computer laboratories had been opened in over 198 secondary schools, established ICT learning centres for children and operationalised the Pan-African e-network at Makerere University and Mulago Hospital where over 500 students and professionals in the field of medicine had in 2011 alone been trained through that network. However, more than seven years since that promise was made no single ICT park has been opened in any part of the country. Former Kigulu North MP, Mr Edward Kafulu Baliddawa, who was also the

founder of Uganda Home Pages, the first private website that was built in 1993 to market Uganda to the outside world, mirrors the frustrations that those with interests in the area of ICT feel due to government's failure to come good on that promise. "We have been talking of these parks for over 10 years now. Even before that manifesto was published we had been talking about them, but nothing ever comes out of the talk," he says. The closest that has been done has been for the National Information Technology Authority-Uganda (NITA-U) and the Uganda Investment Authority to put out an advertisement late last year inviting investors to enter into a Public Private Partnership (PPP) arrangement with government to set up a \$300million (approximately Shs 1.1trillion) on a 17 acre piece of land in Lunyo in Entebbe. The advert reveals that a feasibility study of the project has since been concluded. It also gives an insight into the projected cash flow with an indication that the investor would be able to rake in at least \$121 million in the first three years.

IMPACT

Establishment of an ICT park was meant to have not only spurred growth in the local ICT sector, but also led to the creation of several job openings right from construction, through marketing and finally in the area of innovation.

According to the National Housing and Population Census of 2014 about 11.8 million youth, most of whom are graduates of the many universities and tertiary institutions around the country are either unemployed or simply finding it difficult to get job placements.

Besides, an evaluation of Government's strategy report (2014) dubbed Uganda's Employment Challenge indicates that at least 700,000 young people enter the job market every year. The report, a product of the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, projects that the number will have doubled in about 20 years. It indicates that by 2040, 1.5 million people will be entering the job market every year.

The same report indicates that the cause of unemployment has to a great extent been caused by lack of skills other than what was acquired at university or tertiary institution levels.

In the circumstances it would not be farfetched for anyone to arrive at the conclusion that creation of the ICT parks would not only help ease the unemployment problem, but also help in equipping some of the youths with skills that would have made them more marketable.

One of the other ideas behind the idea of creating ICT parks was that they would attract multinational companies and nationals who would, through their interactions with the locals cause a transfer of knowledge to the Ugandan youths. This has not happened.

Other benefits that had been expected to accrue had been that the parks would serve as a catalyst to spur locals into starting up knowledge based businesses; lead to the establishment of call centres, which would in turn lead to more job opportunities; provide the country with a chance to link local industrial communities to innovative research; and expand government's revenue base as it would attract taxes from the ICT parks. All those have not been realised because of government's failure to come good on its promise.

Training. UPDF officers attached to fourth division who have been trained in computer literacy.

PHOTO BY JOEL TOOYERONGA



Learning. Students attending an Information Technology class. Because the world is operating on fast technology, the government of Uganda is setting up reliable ICT infrastructures that can impact on the economy. PHOTO BY RACHEL MABALA



OFFICIAL EXPLANATION

Both the executive director of BNITA-U, Mr James Saaka, and the Commissioner in charge of innovations and ICT parks in the Ministry of Information Communication Technology and National Guidance, Mr Kenneth Bagarukayo, were not responsive when contacted about progress towards realisation of the promise. But the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on ICT, Ms Mary K Turyahikayo, said that money for the project has never been made available. Ms Turyahikayo, who is also the MP (NRM) for Rubabo County, said the budget for the Financial Year 2017/2018 had also not made a provision for that.

"We have not as yet done anything in that direction. We are searching for funding. We have been allocated land in Entebbe, but not the funds. The only money that was provided is Shs13 billion for the development of an ICT innovation hub where we think our people can sit and help us develop our own domesticated software," Ms Turyahikayo said.

VOICES



"If handled well it is a great idea that would enable our innovators to attract venture capitalists who you cannot attract when you are disjointed. People forget that the Silicon Valley in California was an ICT Park. The model has since been replicated in India, Malaysia, China and South Africa and it is working well for them. It can work well for us too"

EDWARD KAFUFU
BALIDAWA, FORMER
MP KIGULU NORTH AND
FOUNDER UGANDA HOME
PAGES.



"I think the allocation of Shs13billion towards the development of an ICT innovation is a good start. Most of these ICT projects are normally partnerships between governments and private investors. So Uganda will be in good stead to attract investors to partner with it because it will have made a start on its own"

NATHAN IGE ME NABETA,
MP (NRM) JINJA
MUNICIPALITY EAST &
FORMER CHAIRPERSON
OF PARLIAMENTARY
COMMITTEE ON ICT.



"Government simply hasn't done enough in that regard." Google recently announced that it will be training about 10 million Africans from South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, but that is because they have ICT parks and hubs for innovation and have networks and electricity supply. Government needs to make deliberate interventions here"

OGUZU LEE DENIS,
MP (FDC) MARACHA
COUNTY AND SHADOW
MINISTER FOR SCIENCE,

MONITOR'S POSITION

Setting up a reliable ICT infrastructure would have a great impact on the economy, for it would not only boost businesses and add to our competitiveness as a nation at a time when almost the whole of Africa is jostling to attract investments.

Ethiopia, for instance, recognised the value of this and launched a mega money Technology in its Bole 1emi

Prior to that, Kenya had launched its own \$9.6bn Konza Technology City, and more recently Rwanda and Tanzania announced their own plans to launch major ICT projects in Kigali and Bagamoyo, respectively.

Uganda is already playing catch up, and there is a genuine fear we will fall behind in this aspect. We cannot

continue pegging the aspirations of the citizenry on the probability of ever having an investor to partner with the government on this.

The government must get its priorities right and make a conscious decision to find money from its own coffers and fund the investment. ICT is for both now and the future