

Raw deal? Since its launch last year, the facility has had challenges ranging from failure to log in users to frequent network outages and a string of other technical glitches.

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KAMPALA: When the government, through the National Information Technology Authority Uganda (NITA-U), commissioned its much hyped free Internet services in Kampala Central Business District and some parts of Entebbe in September last year, the move was received with enthusiasm.

City dwellers jumped on to the bandwagon in anticipation of accessing free WiFi services in the city.

They believed the offer was a big blessing and would save them from private telecom service providers, who had been accused of cheating their subscribers through charging them exorbitantly for Internet services.

The Ministry of Information, Communication Technology and National Guidance and NITA-U announced they would provide free WiFi services between 6pm and 6am on weekdays and at the weekends.

A year later, users are disgruntled with the free government offer, saying it has not served the intended purpose and that government supplied them "hot air".

Several users that *Daily Monitor* interviewed testified that logging into the system is tedious, with several attempts made before successful login.

Voices



"We had a challenge with the log in option so we have improved that and by the end of this month, we will be able to launch again with better login procedures, for example, you will be able to log in with your Facebook account, Instagram account, or different social media accounts, but also you could do with a simple e-mail."

VIVIAN DDAMBYA,
NITA-U DIRECTOR OF
TECHNICAL SERVICES

"At the launch, we could access the Internet during the day, but later, they switched that off and started only offering the service at night, which is not convenient for many of us. It also has limited hotspots where you can access the Internet, yet at night majority of the people are at home."

JOSEPH NSUBUGA,
RESIDENT OF BUKOTO,
KAMPALA

Disappointed

Mr Mubarak Kisira, who accessed the Internet on the first day of the launch, had hoped to access the free Internet services as and when he wished without any hustle.

He is, however, disappointed that while he used the system, it slowed down at some point and eventually stopped working.

"I got disappointed and stopped trying when it failed to log me in and I had to start using my data bundles I would buy from the telecom operators," Mr Kisira said.

To him, a programme that had promised so much ended up being "hot air".

Mr Joseph Nsubuga, a resident of Bukoto in Nakawa Division, Kampala, is equally frustrated by the failure of the free WiFi service to effectively address the issues of access to free Internet.

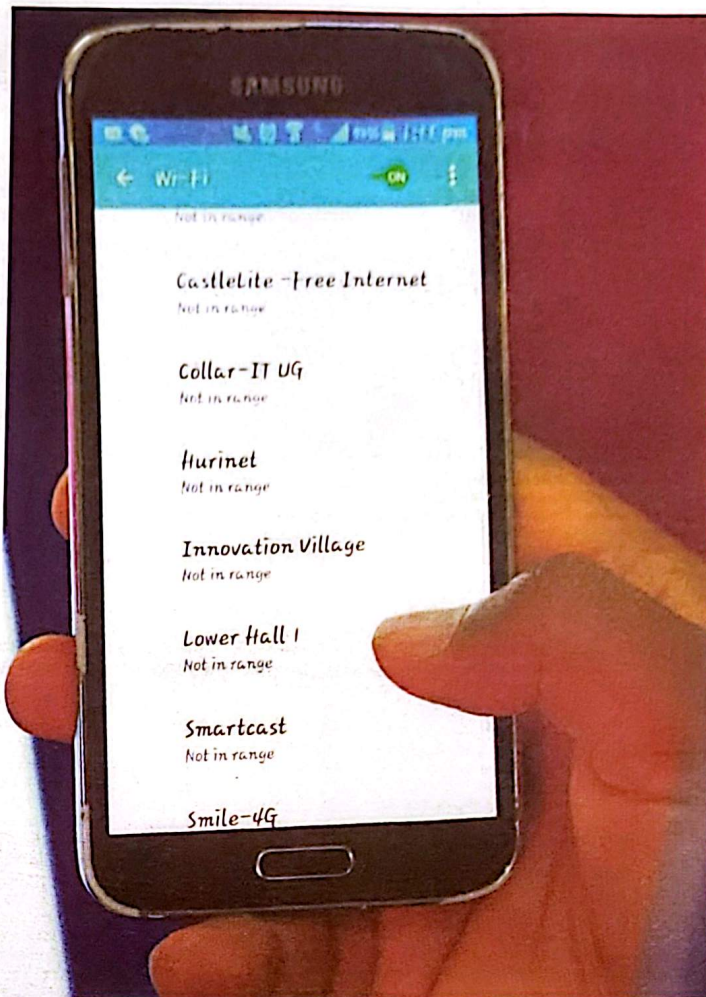
Mr Nsubuga says the programme was much hyped, but failed to live to the expectations.

"At the launch, we could access the Internet during the day, but later, they switched that off and started only offering the service at night, which is not convenient for many of us. It also has limited hotspots where you can access the Internet, yet at night majority of the people are at home," he said.

Both cases are not isolated. Since its launch last year, the facility has had challenges ranging from failure to log in users to frequent network outages and a string of other technical glitches.

Ms Rosemary Nakitende, a boutique owner in Kamwokya, a Kampala suburb, said since the introduction of the free WiFi, she has never suc-

Free Internet: Users accuse govt of selling them 'hot air'



THE PROGRAMME

The launch. Dubbed MYUG, the free WiFi was launched on September 30 last year ahead of the Kampala City Festival. By October last year, only 19,000 users logged into the service, the lowest number. However, in the subsequent months, the number kept on increasing until when it peaked in September this year, hitting the 100,000-mark.

ceeded in logging in. She said she registered all her details, but on several occasions when she attempted to login, it failed until she gave up.

"I was disappointed by the frequent failures and I decided to abandon it all together," she said.

However, not all has been gloom. Mr Geoffrey Masereka, a resident

at Bukoto on Kisasi road in Kampala, said he has been using the facility on a number of times at night, although he would have loved to use it during the day.

"The Internet speed at night has been fast and you can access what you want easily," he said.

Govt on defence

NITA-U officials, however, dispute claims by users that the system has failed.

They argue that the logins are an indicator that the free WiFi has been a huge success.

A total of 757,654 users logged in to access the free government WiFi in and around Kampala, according to government.

While NITA-U officials admit some of the challenges the users had to go

Internet. A mobile phone user attempts to connect to the free government WiFi in Kampala yesterday. Many users are disgruntled with the free government offer, saying it has not served the intended purpose. PHOTO BY ERIC DOMINIC BUKENYA

through before accessing the free Internet services, they say they have worked on it and the whole service will be launched again at the end of this month.

Ms Vivian Ddambya, the director of technical services at NITA-U, said over the last one year, the logins have been impressive.

She said at the beginning, they didn't think the numbers would swell.

She, however, said they have had challenges, particularly with logging in. According to her, the new version will include options for logging in using social media accounts as opposed to the current system that only demands for one's e-mail and phone details.

"We had a challenge with the login option so we have improved that and by the end of this month, we will be able to launch again with better login procedures, for example, you will be able to login with your Facebook account, Instagram, or different social media accounts, but also you could do with a simple e-mail," she said.

She said through the improved system, it will be much easier for people to access the free Internet services. She also said the plan was to encourage the use of Internet among people and make government services more accessible.

757,654

THE TOTAL NUMBER OF USERS WHO HAVE LOGGED INTO SERVICE IN AND AROUND KAMPALA, ACCORDING TO GOVERNMENT.

"For example, if you login onto Myug during the day, you won't be able to get Internet, but you will be able to access all government services without Internet," she explained.

According to her, since the service was launched, they have been able to track the daily log ins since every login detail is stored.

She also dispelled fears that the service was a ploy to track the Opposition members and those who disagree with the government.

"We wanted to know, for example, how many women verses men were accessing Internet for planning purposes and it is also for our national indices. As a country, when they try to get you on national competitive and e-government indexes, they ask such things."

Ms Ddambya adds that over the last one year, the number of women accessing the facility has been disappointing. According to her, out of more than 700,000 people who accessed the facility, only 30 per cent were females.

"It's a big disparity so we try to figure out why there is such a big disparity and how we can close that gap," she says.

With the improved accessibility, it is hoped that more users will be able to access the free Internet services.

Ms Ddambya also said plans are under way to expand the hotspots to more places within the city and beyond, although she has not given a timeline for the expansion.