

Third Party Evaluator's Opinion on Mashonaland Manicaland Digitalization Project (II)

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1. Relevance

At the time of the project appraisal Zimbabwe was coming out of the first phase of its economic liberalization program and getting into the second phase. Coincidentally this project being evaluated was also the second phase of the modernization and expansion of the telecommunications infrastructure assisted by JBIC. Part of the objectives of the economic reforms was to achieve sustainable development through the creation of an enabling environment for investment. Naturally a well-developed and reliable communications system is an integral part and essential component of any meaningful development endeavour. The demand for telecommunication services both quantitatively and qualitatively was very high. The national telephone density and more particularly the regional one, was very poor. Information and Communication Technology were booming worldwide and the nation needed to keep pace with the trends and developments, which were affecting the growth of industry and commerce in other parts of the world. In Harare there was a lot of construction of both residential and business premises driving the demand for telecommunication services even higher. Even at the time of the project evaluation the relevance of this project to national development could not be over-emphasised. Whilst significant development had taken place over the past years in mobile communications, the demand for fixed telephones had even increased. The economic challenges that the nation had been facing including shortage of foreign currency meant that very little in terms of infrastructure development had taken place since the closure of the project. This project therefore was indeed consistent with and relevant to the developmental plans of the region and the nation as whole.

2. Effectiveness

Problems experienced in the tender process and the apparent lack of transparency caused the project to be terminated prematurely at a stage where only a small part had been completed. This saw subscriber switchboards of only 38,300 lines being installed in the Mashonaland Provinces representing less than a third of the planned switchboard capacity. In terms of geographical coverage the installed switchboards were done in Harare only leaving out other parts of the province and not touching the other town centres in the entire Manicaland province. Now also since neither subscriber cables nor transmission lines were installed at all in both provinces, the effectiveness of this project in terms of meeting the desired objectives and contributing to the telecommunications development of Zimbabwe was obviously low. This was worsened by the fact that there was a greater need for subscriber cables than for switchboard capacity and that the demand for connectivity was even growing sharply during the project period. Qualitatively however where the installed switchboards replaced the old analogue switchboards it is apparent that this resulted in the improvement of service as can be deduced from the impact assessment survey. This assessment would obviously also be influenced by the effects of the earlier work done under the first phase. Given that the actual achievements were significantly much lower than the planned achievements, the effectiveness of this project by all intents and purposes should be considered very limited and low.