

MEDIA STATEMENT

08 September 2022

BRIEFING ON PROPOSED NEXT GENERATION RADIO FREQUENCY SPECTRUM POLICY

1. INTRODUCTION

As committed in the 2022/23 Budget Vote Speech and following approval by the Cabinet on 31 August 2022, the Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies, Honourable Khumbudzo Ntshavheni has gazetted an invitation to provide written submissions on the proposed Next Generation Radio Frequency Spectrum Policy for Economic Development (“Spectrum Policy”).

The Policy aims to advance long-term public interest from the use of spectrum which is a finite natural resource to support the rollout of communications networks for socio-economic development of the country. It further seeks to utilise the spectrum to drive broader and inclusive economic participation and development for all.

2. CONTEXT

Radio frequency spectrum is a vital element for development of the electronic communications network infrastructure.

The availability of spectrum must result in the reduction of the cost of communication. It is a foregone conclusion that data has become a new basic utility at the same level as water and electricity. It has become the enabler of innovation and wealth creation for any country. It is in this context that we are seized with reviewing all policy instruments to drive down the reduction of cost to communicate.

The right of use of spectrum vests with the State. All sectors should benefit from its use. The spectrum must provide all South Africans with access to a range of private, commercial, defence, national security, scientific and public safety applications.

In order to ensure social, cultural, and sustainable economic development, the revised Spectrum Policy seeks to consider services and applications from vertical industries and sectors such as agriculture, education, health, manufacturing, mining, etc. This will be on top of the traditional applications such as fixed, mobile, and broadcasting.

The spectrum policy continues to recognize provision of spectrum for government services such as education, public protection and disaster relief services, safety services and state emergency interventions in response to disasters.

3. OBJECTIVES AND PRINCIPLES OF THE SPECTRUM POLICY

South Africa is faced with shortage and limitations on availability of spectrum. This is due to insufficient allocation of spectrum for mobile services. In order to address network capacity constraints, the telecommunication companies have to deploy and densify networks. This is a capital-intensive exercise. The ripple effect of this is passed to or suffered by citizens/consumers through high access data cost (high cost to communicate).

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.

We further continue to experience connectivity divide resulting in perpetual exclusion of rural, remote, and underserved communities in the country. By making spectrum available, we will enable telecommunications sector to build resilient networks in all geographic locations of our country.

The current spectrum regime of South Africa continues to exclude SMMEs and new entrants in the data market in favour of a few market players. Through this policy, we aim to adopt spectrum management approaches that promotes SMME participation and emergence of new entrants to the ICT sector. 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. However, we must continue with measures which will ensure that ultimately SMMEs are included in the ICT sector including on access to spectrum.

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 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 IMT in other bands.

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 5G and others. Acknowledging that spectrum is a finite resource, the adoption of more advance 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 MNOs. 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 sovereignty, national security and public safety needs of South Africans cannot be left behind as we develop the Spectrum Policy.

4. CONCLUSION

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 today, 08 September 2022 date of the notice.

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