

ICT stakeholders target rural areas

By Alexander Lweikila

TANZANIA's stakeholders in the Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) are targeting rural areas.

This is the milestone in Tanzania's economy, alleviation of poverty which is rampant in rural areas.

It is also a step in bridging the gap between the south and the north in use of ICTs, and between the rural and urban. The gap, which has made other parts of the world to have more access to ICTs than others.

Globally, this is important as more than two-third of world population is not connected to telecommunications.

This was a central focus of the rural ICT access forum jointly organised by the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority, the Swedish International Development Authority, the United Nations Development Programme, the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology and the Dar es Salaam Institute of Technology.

In the north, according to Prof Ophelia Mascarenhas of the University of Dar es Salaam, ICTs are evenly distributed and evolving on equal partnership with other countries, but in the south ICTs are imported and not locally developed.

Many participants said that the use of ICTs in rural

areas is not avoidable for Tanzania to have a stable and sustainable economy.

They view the ICT sector as the most potent force in shaping the 21st century.

The world economy is depending on the use of ICTs. The economy is increasingly digitised compared to previously two decades.

Prof Mascarenhas, who conducted a study on ICTs and Rural Livelihoods in Tanzania, says that the impact of ICTs on reduction of poverty is critical both at the household level, rural areas in particular.

She blamed the government for failure to consider information as a pillar in the poverty reduction strategy (PRS).

"Information is not one of the pillar nor one of the cross-cutting issues nor even one of the aspects of the strategy. This needs a focus and as stakeholders in ICT sector, we have to make sure that the mistake does not repeat again in the next PRS," she said.

For GSM Business Strategy from Ericsson in Finland, Michael Bjarhov, the extension of ICTs in rural areas is essential to Tanzania's economy, and the Government should bridge the digital divide so as to promote sustainable economic growth, adding that let us make the rural population be the part of the 1.7 billion mobile users worldwide.

"For rural communities, for instance, prepaid mobile

phones enables users to send messages across distances that could have taken a person several days to travel," said Bjarhov, adding that ICTs would improve standard of living among rural populations.

The chief executive officer of Tanzania Telecommunications Limited, George Mbowe, says the use of ICTs is not escapable in the increasing digitised economy and business. He said ICT sector has to be extended to rural areas where majority Tanzanians live so as to increase economic activities, which needs ICT facilitations.

On trade, he said, any successful business depends on how it uses ICTs.

He gave an example of fishermen in Mwanza that they negotiate with fish processors through cellphones while they are still in the lake.

A director of Agro Focus Tanzania, Dr Mustafa Mhona, says the use of ICTs in rural areas will hasten business activities there as they will be no physical contact between farmers and the businessmen.

"One would be able to contact and make negotiations with primary societies though mobile phones without direct contact with farmers, then transactions would be made through banks, which has a good computerised network," he noted, adding that the farmers would also be able to identify markets and prices of their crops.