
Ghana's Journey to DTT

By Paul Meller

When the ITU adopted its road map for migration from analogue to digital terrestrial TV in 2006 Ghana was one of the first African nations to respond to the challenge.

The ITU set deadlines for the termination of international protection for analogue broadcast transmission: 2015 for UHF bands and 2020 for VHF bands. By the end of 2010 Ghana had in place a National Digital Broadcasting Migration Committee (DBMC) chaired by the then Minister of Communications and involving representatives from several ministries, Parliament, regulators and executives from both state and private broadcasters.

The committee was given a broad range of responsibilities. It would oversee the technical and logistical aspects of the migration. It would take the lead on making policy recommendations to the Government to enable Ghana achieve a cost effective and timely migration from analogue to digital broadcasting. The committee was also put in charge of the challenge of informing Ghanaians about the switch over.

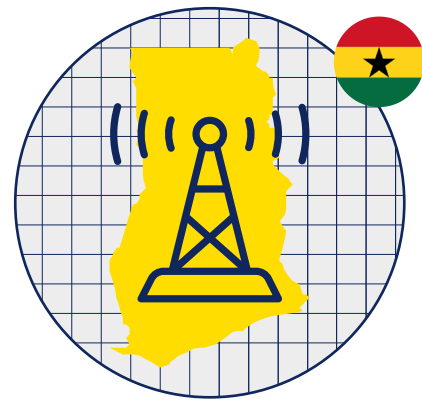
In 2015 the government awarded K-Net Limited, an indigenous Ghanaian company a contract worth \$82.5 million to build the DTT network and run it for the first three years.

By the end of 2016 a network of 42 transmitter sites was built. Each site has two transmitters – one dedicated to regional transmissions, the other national. Each has capacity for up to 20 TV channels. The network reaches around 90% of the population, or roughly 80% of the country.

“While it was being built the DBMC’s communications sub-committee launched an extensive ad campaign on TV, in daily newspapers and on billboards to inform Ghanaians of what DTT would offer them,” said Kwame Baafuor Osei-Akoto, an assistant manager of engineering at Ghana’s National Communications Authority (NCA). It also ran information campaigns in schools, places of worship and markets.

“The public was well prepared for DTT,” Mr Baafuor said.

In parallel the NCA set minimum standards for all receivers - digital set top boxes as well as digital TV sets – and they developed logos bearing the words ‘Digital Ghana’ together with a thumbs up design for HD and SD DTT receivers to help Ghanaians purchase the right equipment to access the digital TV channels. (See illustration):



Initially most other African countries looked to Ghana as a role model for how to switch to digital. But the DTT network was not fully operational until late 2017/2018 due to problems getting power to some of the transmission sites. And other problems of a more political and legal nature emerged that held back the switch to digital even further.

In 2017 Nana Akufo-Addo won the Presidency in the Ghanaian general election, defeating incumbent John Mahama. The new government took time to order an audit of the entire project. They disbanded the DBMC and all its sub-committees. Progress towards adopting DTT slowed as a result.

“The public was well prepared for DTT”

The new government also signalled plans to introduce conditional access to the DTT network. This was seen as a way of recuperating revenues they should have been receiving from BBC-style license fees for access to public TV channels. Just like in many countries including the UK, many citizens in Ghana don’t pay their license fee.

Private broadcasters opposed the idea of conditional access. So did other relevant stakeholders in the broadcasting industry and a majority of the populace. The Ghana Independent Broadcasters Association petitioned the Supreme Court to make a determination on the matter. The court did not rule on the substantive case. However, as conditional access had not been introduced yet the Court ruled that no action can be taken against the government. But a lot of time was lost in this dispute.

One area that has seen progress since the 2016 election is the auctioning of frequencies to mobile phone operators. Last year the government raised \$60 million from Vodafone Ghana in return for a 20 MHz slice of the 800 MHz spectrum band, and an additional \$30 million from MTN Ghana for 10 MHz in the same band. These digital dividends followed the first digital dividend of \$67.5 million generated through the auctioning of 20 MHz in the 800 MHz band in 2015 to MTN Ghana.

The journey to DTT is almost over. The original target date for analogue switch-off was September 21st 2017. It was missed due to delays described above. But a new tentative date of December 31st 2020 has been set.

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