

EAC ministers push for fast digital broadcasting migration

 By [Walter Wafula](#)

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Ministers responsible for communication in the five East African Community (EAC) partner states have called for the swift creation of policies that will enable the region to migrate to digital broadcasting from analogue on schedule.

Key among the policy actions that the ministers want from the partner states is the scrapping of import duty on Set Top Boxes (STBs) in order to accelerate the transition by December 2012. STBs are decoders used to convert analogue signals to digital to enable analogue television owners to watch TV.

"The Sectoral Council urged partner states to consider zero-rating duty on Set Top Boxes as a means of accelerating digital broadcast migration programmes, and directed the secretariat to submit this recommendation to the ministers of finance for consideration," Owora Richard Othieno, head of department; Corporate Communications and Public Affairs said in a statement.

The EAC-5 including; Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi, agreed to 31 December 2012, as their analogue to digital migration. This followed the 2006 International Telecommunications Union meeting where its member states agreed to complete the revolutionary transition by December 2015.

However, the switch over process in Kenya and Uganda has been muddled by conflicts over signal distribution by government and private television owners. The latter have vehemently opposed the appointment of state baked television companies like Uganda Broadcasting Corporation TV, to be the sole signal distributors, because of their inefficiency.

The EAC ministers' recommendations from the ministers came up at the 9th Meeting of the Sectoral Council on Transport, Communications and Meteorology (TCM), held two weeks ago in Tanzania. The meeting was attended by Nibigira Concilie, the minister in charge of telecommunications, information, communication in Burundi, Dr. Alexis Nzahabwanimana, in charge of infrastructure in Rwanda, Capt. (Rtd.) George Mkuchika, the minister of state, regional administration and local government in Tanzania, John Byabagambi the minister of state for works in Uganda and Franklin Bett the minister in charge of roads in Kenya. During the meeting, the ministers discussed developments in the communications and transport sub-sectors.

The ministers also directed partner states to expedite the process of putting in place legislation for the implementation digital TV broadcasting, and to monitor technology developments for digital broadcast receivers. This is aimed at developing receiver specifications that minimize the cost of digital broadcast migration for the partner states.

Limit the number of signal distributors, suggest ministers

The ministers further suggested that partner states limit the number of signal distributors, provided that a public signal distributor is fully funded by the state, or open the signal distribution market segment to full competition, where the government is unable to fund a public signal distributor.

At the meeting, ministers directed partner states to align their national programmes on analog-to-digital broadcast transition to the roadmap and approved the regional Roadmap for Analog-to-Digital Broadcast Transition.

In light of this, the partner states have so far accomplished the following policy actions:

- established national committees to spearhead the digital broadcast migration process and are in the process of developing minimum standards for digital receivers and STBs.
- Adopted Digital Video Broadcasting - Terrestrial (DVB-T) and its second generation variant (DVB-T2) as the transmission standard and MPEG-4 as the digital compression standard.
- Set up a technical committee on broadcasting which also proposed that partner states adopt the Unified Licensing Framework (ULF) for digital broadcasting, as recommended by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).
- Agreed that 31 December 2012 be the analog switch-off date but noted that the switch-off timetable will depend on the achievement of the roll-out plan for digital broadcast migration.

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