Central African Republic

The landlocked Central African Republic's recent uncertain institutional situation has constrained investment in broadband networks and access to cross-border submarine cables. Mobile, however, remains a bright spot, with a reasonable level of competition, given the challenges.

Key indicators for Central African Republic (2017)		Africa	World
Fixed-telephone sub. per 100 inhab.	0.04	0.9	13.0
Mobile-cellular sub. per 100 inhab.	25.2	74.4	103.6
Active mobile-broadband sub. per 100 inhab.	4.7	24.8	61.9
3G coverage (% of population)	30.1	62.7	87.9
LTE/WiMAX coverage (% of population)	19.0	28.4	76.3
Individuals using the Internet (%)	*4.3*	22.1	48.6
Households with a computer (%)	*2.9*	8.9	47.1
Households with Internet access (%)	*3.0*	19.4	54.7
International bandwidth per Internet user (kbit/s)	1.6	11.2	76.6
Fixed-broadband sub. per 100 inhab.	0.0	0.6	13.6
Fixed-broadband sub. by speed tiers, % distribution			
-256 kbit/s to 2 Mbit/s	84.9	38.7	4.2
-2 to 10 Mbit/s	15.1	37.2	13.2
-equal to or above 10 Mbit/s	-	24.1	82.6

Note: Data in italics are ITU estimates. Source: ITU (as of June 2018).

Mobile services: There are four mobile operators in the country; MOOV, which launched in 2005 and is a subsidiary of Morocco Telecom; TELECEL, the oldest operator in the market, having launched in 1996, a subsidiary of South Africa-headquartered ECONET WIRELESS; AZUR, which launched in 2004 and is owned by a private Congolese group; and Orange, the latest market entrant, launched in 2007, a subsidiary of Orange France. Despite the relatively large number of operators, penetration is low, challenged by the country's instability since 2013, which has constrained investment and coverage expansion. Orange was the first operator to launch 3G services in 2013, with coverage mainly limited to urban areas. An inadequate electricity network and national backbone infrastructure make the expansion of mobile networks challenging.

Fixed services: The Central African Telecommunications Society (SOCATEL) is the incumbent operator. It was partly privatized in 1990, when 40 per cent was sold to a subsidiary of France Telecom (rebranded as Orange in 2013). SOCATEL is experiencing competition from mobile operators, and is further constrained by its limited fixed-telephone subscriber base of only a few thousand subscriptions, which is concentrated in urban areas. Most broadband Internet access is through the mobile operators, although there are some fixed wireless broadband operators offering service using WiMAX technology. Development of the national backbone is imperative since, as a landlocked country, the Central African Republic does not have a direct outlet to international Internet capacity on undersea fibre-optic cables. The World Bank's Central African Backbone (CAB) project provided support for the development of a fibre-optic backbone with multiple cross-border connections. Further, the country was perceived as a potential key transit point for cables linking the East and West coasts of Africa. However, the reluctance to end SOCATEL's monopoly over international gateways, combined with an unstable institutional environment, forced this component of the World Banks's project to be cancelled. The country continues to rely on costly satellite connections for most of its international Internet bandwidth, constraining investment and resulting in high Internet prices.

Government policy: The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications in charge of New Technologies is responsible for sector oversight. The 2007 Law on Telecommunications Regulation is the main legislation governing the sector. However, a draft Law on Electronic Communication was adopted in October 2017. The Agency for Regulation of Telecommunications is the sector regulator, charged with implementing the 2007 law. But with the adoption of the new law, this agency will be replaced by the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Communications and Post.

Conclusion: This landlocked country faces severe challenges, including an uncertain institutional environment. This limits the support available for constructing an open access national backbone to avail itself of cost-based capacity on undersea cables in neighbouring countries. As a result, the deployment of broadband access infrastructure and service is constrained. Despite these circumstances, it has a competitive mobile market.