

I-ECNS LICENSING IN SOUTH AFRICA: ICASA'S DISCUSSION DOCUMENT AND THE CASE FOR NEW ENTRANTS

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I-ECNS licensing: a turning point for South Africa's connectivity?

ICASA's discussion document on I-ECNS licensing could signal a significant turning point for South Africa's electronic communications market. If the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) adopts its preliminary views on issuing new Individual Electronic Communications

Network Services (I-ECNS) licences, it could open a new chapter in market entry. I believe the opportunity is not simply to issue more licences, but to translate easier entry into reliable, affordable connectivity where it is needed most.

There is reason for both optimism and caution. The wave of licences that followed [Altech Autopage Cellular's](#) court victory did not deliver the expected proliferation of national infrastructure providers. More licences alone will not bridge the digital divide. But the need for connectivity in rural and underserved areas makes the question of who can build and operate networks especially important.

People in far-flung communities must not be left as second-class digital citizens. Moves to free spectrum previously tied to the wireless open access network (WOAN), alongside efforts to reinvigorate the Universal Service and Access Agency of South Africa (USAASA), point towards a broader effort to close that gap. Opening the door to new network entrants could be another important piece of the puzzle.

What does ICASA's discussion document say about I-ECNS licensing?

ICASA's discussion document on I-ECNS licensing addresses a central barrier to entry: prospective entrants generally have to acquire ownership or control of an existing licence through a transfer process. Its preliminary assessment is that the current framework for transferring I-ECNS and Individual Electronic Communications Services (I-ECS) licences has not been effective and efficient in promoting competition.

The discussion document also identifies apparent demand for new I-ECNS licences. Its preliminary views suggest that issuing them would support competition and the universal provision of services, particularly in rural and underserved areas, and that the benefits would likely outweigh the associated costs, including because of late-mover advantages. Importantly, this is not a separate licensing exercise for satellite services (we all know who ICASA's emphasis on this, is directed at): the Electronic Communications Act's licensing regime is technology neutral.

The real test, in my view, will be whether liberalising entry produces networks that reach beyond already well-served markets. The opportunity is substantial, but it remains conditional: these are preliminary views, not a final decision to issue new licences.

When are comments on ICASA's discussion document due?

Stakeholders have 45 working days from publication of [ICASA's discussion document](#) to submit written representations. That consultation is an opportunity to help shape a framework that turns market access into meaningful digital inclusion. Change may have been gradual, but South Africa's next connectivity leap could be closer than it appears.