

# Telecoms integral to growth

By **BABOUCARR J. SANYANG**

MANAGING DIRECTOR, GAMBIA TELECOMMUNICATIONS COMPANY



**BABOUCARR SANYANG** is a native of Kalagi in the Western Division of The Gambia and in the course of a long career with the Gambia Telecommunications Company rose through the ranks. He was appointed acting Managing Director in June 2011 and was recently confirmed as Managing Director.

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**Gamtel has played a central role in developing The Gambia's telecommunications network. Please talk us through some of the company's milestones.**

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The growing importance of telecommunications as an engine for socio-economic growth was recognised long ago in The Gambia, and reform of the sector began in the early 1980s when the government took over international telephone services from Cable & Wireless and incorporated them into one company. This led to the setting up of the Gambia Telecommunications Company Limited (GAMTEL), controlled by two shareholders: the Government and the Gambia National Insurance Company (GNIC).

Thanks to the switch from analogue to digital transmission, over the next decade the company's financial performance improved significantly. At the same time, the customer base increased and new services emerged in the market, requiring network expansion and modernisation programmes.

This involved creating a new fibre optic cable network throughout the country, thus expanding and extending services beyond the capital to rural areas, while at the same time providing increased bandwidth for the business sector.

Next came the liberalisation of the sale of subscriber terminals, marking the end of the end of the monopoly in the delivery of telecommunication services in the Gambian market.

And then in 1993, the first internet service was introduced. Between 1993 to date, Gamtel has continued to steadily increase the size of its network as well as its coverage. It financed and commissioned a Paging service, Tamanding, in 1995 and an internet gateway, co-sponsored by the UNDP under its Internet Initiative for Africa (IIA). During the same period, Gamtel was tasked by government to provide the country's first nationwide television and radio service prepaid calling cards and other value-added services where also provided to customers.

An internet resource centre with state-of-the-art equipment was put in place in February 2006 to counter security threats, minimize spam and vulnerability to viruses on the Internet. World-class hosting services (e-mail with own domain, web sites with any domain and databases) have been made available, and the pop-based e-mail capacity increased to over 30,000 accounts.

The international Internet bandwidth has also been increased from 9Mbps to 45Mbps plus an additional 10Mbps via satellite. This brings the total international Internet bandwidth capacity to 50Mbps, making The Gambia second in West Africa with the largest international Internet bandwidth.

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**The ACE project is set to connect West Africa to the world, ushering in a new age of internet access. What opportunities do you see this creating?**

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Gamtel is responsible for bringing the internet to The Gambia, providing the first access in 1993. Gamtel has played a key role in the Africa Coast Europe (ACE) submarine internet cable project, which has now landed in the Gamiba, part of a strategy to ensure that The Gambia regains its position in the telecommunication industry in the sub-region.

Everybody has the right to access modern telecommunications infrastructure. This means that we must all support the building of a reliable and modern information and communications infrastructure. This is pivotal for the improvement of service delivery for both national and international businesses in The Gambia.

Gamtel, in collaboration with the Gambian government, sees data service delivery as part of the national development agenda in the context of Vision 2020 and our commitment to make The Gambia Africa's silicon valley. In a quest to fulfil these objectives Gamtel has numerous projects to upgrade and expand the national network infrastructure, such as, the replacement of an existing 400 kilometres of fibre on the south bank and building of additional fibre network on the north bank. This will also include building of additional fibre networks in the form of rings to provide adequate capacity and enable effective security countrywide. A total of 817 kilometres of fibre is to be built for the entire project.

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**What role do you see Gamtel playing in establishing an e-learning platform for the country's education system?**

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There has been an increase in literacy and improved education in The Gambia over the last decade. The government has built many schools at basic and secondary level. It has not only encouraged private

sector involvement in the development of tertiary institutions, but has also now built a university. To an extent these initiatives are being supported by Gamtel in the form of providing telecommunication network infrastructure for internet access. Gamtel has begun the transformation of its entire network infrastructure as a way to create the enabling environment for broadband services through government-arranged financing of the ECOWAN project by IDB.

In the meantime Gamtel has already launched a project (fibre to the customers) for reaching both corporate customers and institutions in preparation to roll out broadband services countrywide.

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**What is your vision for meeting the growing demand and need for more sophisticated financial services through telephony?**

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The requirements of our customers are growing and changing with regards to other non-telecommunications services, so the telecommunication network and technologies can be used to facilitate the fulfilment of these requirements.

Gamtel has formed partnerships with software applications developers, system integrators, and financial institutions to use its network to roll out improved services. Gamtel believes that the future of the domestic telecommunications market is shifting from fixed network services to the convergence of fixed and mobile network related services. Hence, it has decided to deploy Next Generation Networks (NGN) to facilitate the delivery of bundled service in the form of triple play etc. These services could include e-banking, e-commerce, iptv, video on demand, cellphone payment, and others.

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**Gamtel's focus was initially on urban areas. Please tell us about progress in rolling out a terrestrial fibre-optic transmission network for rural areas under your Cross Gambia Project.**

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The rolling out of the rural terrestrial fibre project is not linked to the Cross-Gambia project. The Cross-Gambia fibre project was installed between Senegal and Gambia and connects from Karang through Barra, Banjul Serrekunda, Brikama, Mandinaba, Jiboroh and terminates at Selety in the southern region of Senegal (Cassamance).

Both Gamtel and Sonatel signed an agreement for recognizing the project and an implementation unit was set up with terms and conditions for the construction, maintenance, and operation of the system Cross Gambia.

The rural terrestrial fibre project is part of the ECOWAN project, which involves the Gambian government working in collaboration with the IDB,

which has set aside funds for the project. Although there is counterpart funding set aside that Gamtel can use, most of the financing has been secured by the Gambian government with the Islamic Development Bank. The project has just started and is scheduled to last for two years.

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**What is Gamtel's strategy in the cellular market, and what do you believe is your competitive edge?**

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In 2001 the government set up Gamcel as a subsidiary of Gamtel: this was before the coming of competition in the Gambian telecommunication market. This has made incoming private GSM operators aware of the need to be competitive. Gamtel has embarked on an aggressive marketing campaign that has seen it roll out data services such as XDSL through its fixed network, and which is dominating the corporate segment of the market. The trend is for revenue on voice services to decline, while increasing on data services. Gamtel's current strategy is to rehabilitate the existing fixed network and expand and transform it into an NGN technology based environment so we can roll out innovative broadband services. All these developments testify to company's sensitivity to our customers' communications needs and its resolve to fulfill the objective of providing world-class telecommunications and related services to the door steps of Gambians. And Gamtel will, no doubt, strive harder to bridge the existing digital divide.

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**Gamtel is a pioneer in corporate social responsibility, with a cooperative welfare scheme offering staff a range of benefits, including loans to the company's staff. Please tell us about your other activities and initiatives in the wider community.**

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Gamtel is one of the largest employers, with a workforce of more than 1,000 people, about a quarter of which are women. Training and skills development has always been at the core of our approach. At the same time, we have been pioneers in setting up staff initiatives: this was the first company in The Gambia to set up and sponsor a football team, and which has participated at international level. As part of our corporate social responsibility program, Gamtel works in many areas of socio-economic development, with initiatives to help women and girls through health and education programs. There is also the presidential alternative treatment program, work to rehabilitate a female medical ward in the Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital, as well as work in rural areas. Gamtel has helped many of its staff to build homes and to educate their families through long-term loans. Other initiatives to help out staff facing difficulties also exist.

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