Information and Communications Technology

Over the last 10-15 years, Trinidad and Tobago has done well to lay a platform of ICT infrastructure and connectivity. This infrastructure includes multiple data centres, an Internet Exchange Point (IXP), hosting facilities, a DNS root server, five international subsea cables as well as terrestrial fibre. Mobile network coverage is at 100% and mobile penetration has hovered around 145% over the last three years, which ranks this small Caribbean nation in the top quartile globally.

Market Evolution

Over the last few years, the telecommunications sector has gone through several rounds of increased competition, thereby enhancing affordability, which has led to accelerated market consolidation.

In 2014, Digicel, the largest mobile player in the region, bought the submarine cable assets of Global Caribbean Fibre and Global Caribbean Network to create a fibre optic cable network of approximately 3,100km providing capacity from Trinidad in the southern Caribbean to Puerto Rico in the north.

Cable and Wireless (C&W) which has traditionally held a 49% share of the incumbent state telecoms provider – Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT) – has been required to relinquish that holding ever since it fully acquired Columbus International (trading as FLOW) in 2015 – a main domestic competitor. In turn, in 2016, C&W was subsequently bought by London-based telecom giant Liberty Global for US$5 billion.

TSTT has been getting in on the act too. Just this month (May 2017) the company purchased 100% of the shares of Massy Communications for $255 million. The purchase will allow TSTT to have immediate access to an additional 34,000 homes in Diego Martin, Port of Spain, Trincity, Arima and San Fernando, which Massy Communications has already passed with fibre optic technology.

Trinidad and Tobago - Potential To Become a Regional Hub

Trinidad and Tobago is fortunate in that it lies below that transatlantic hurricane belt. As such, it is much less prone to natural disasters as compared to many of its Caribbean and Latin American counterparts such as Puerto Rico, Jamaica and The Bahamas. This makes the country a good centre for the location of regional data centres. Commentators from the UK-based Oxford Group report that, "The [ongoing] development of Tier-3 data centres with security certifications in Trinidad and Tobago... means the sector may have reached the critical mass needed to persuade clients [to host their data locally]."

One company which has been building out operations in

Trinidad to manage their regional portfolio of services, is Cable and Wireless/Liberty Global.

"There are many elements that made Trinidad and Tobago the firm's obvious choice, including its vastly higher education levels compared to regional peers and the overall amount of resources within the country. Trinidad is going to become the hub for delivering our managed services for all English-speaking countries, including Trinidad" says David D'Oliveira, Vice President of C&W Business Trinidad.

The result of all of this is that corporate customers are benefiting from better quality services, lower prices, increased bandwidth and fewer concerns regarding business continuity.

Spectrum

The Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT) has indicated that there are plans afoot to auction the 700 megahertz spectrum band to add capacity to the market. Given that data is the single biggest growth area in mobility, further announcements on this spectrum band are anxiously anticipated.

Legislation

The legislation which covers the telecommunications sector is in place, although needed amendments to the Telecommunications Act and attendant regulations have been slow in coming.

The key regulatory aspects that are missing however are specific policies, laws and regulations that would govern the online financial/trading environment. For example, it is not clear whether a domestic (or international)

IT service provider operating in the domestic online payments space should be subject to oversight by the Central Bank. There is also a lack of clarity with regard to issues of cross-border taxation, standards for sharing credit information, standards for information security and privacy, as well as institutional infrastructure to facilitate individual citizen/business redress in the event of an e-commerce related trading dispute.

As with other CARICOM territories, other areas requiring attention include:

- Data Protection including Privacy Impact Assessment and Government Information Systems

- Consumer Protection Guidelines for Online Transactions

- Electronic Payment Offences

- E-Evidence

E-Commerce and E-Payment

Many of the core electronic payment infrastructures are in place. In this regard, the automated clearing house, the real time gross settlement system, the inter-bank payment system, point-of-sale devices, automated teller machines, automated bill payment services, and the international credit card switch have all been

comprehensively in place for some time. This however has not translated into a vibrant e-payments availability dynamic for local firms. The population with access to credit cards stands at only 15% and the majority of both the citizen and business population – as well as the government – still do not have access to digital payment (and receipt of digital payment) technology through the local banking sector.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, Trinidad and Tobago has laid an enviable foundation of telecommunications infrastructure and stands out as a gem within the Caribbean from a communication and internet access perspective. The challenge will be to translate that foundation into accelerated economic and social development progress for its citizens. In this regard, the government needs to fast-track its efforts to digitise its internal processes and e-services. The private sector needs to convert cheap bandwidth and data-centre availability into a vibrant and innovative e-commerce dynamic which will drive innovation, increase incomes, bolster exports, and create a prosperous, diversified and resilient economy for this high potential nation state.

Fixed Telephone (Landline) Operators:

Columbus Communications Trinidad Limited

Digicel (Trinidad and Tobago) Limited

Massy Communications Limited (formerly Three Sixty Communications Limited)

RVR Technologies Limited

Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago Limited (TSTT)

Mobile Telephone:

Digicel (Trinidad and Tobago) Limited

Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago Limited (TSTT)