

Press Release

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CUTS is concerned with the continuation of the Communications Towers Project

Early this week, the Minister of Transport and Communication, Hon. Brian Mushimba launched the second phase of the Communication Towers Project. The multi-million Kwacha project was kicked off at Naanjuca in Western Province in an effort by the Zambian government to improve access to information and communication technology, especially in rural areas.

Having followed this project since its inception, the Consumer Unity Trust Society (CUTS) wishes to express its concern by the government's decision to proceed with the second phase of this project with same contractor given the deficiencies of the first phase of the project.

In 2014 the government launched a project entitled 'Connecting Chiefdom Towers' through ZICTA to close the digital gap that existed between urban and rural areas. In this project towers were to be erected with the aim of integrating citizens in marginalised communities.

The tender document given by ZICTA instructed the contracted vendor to ensure that, among other things, the installed radio access equipment on the erected towers should provide rural macro coverage of at least 5km in radius. However, findings by CUTS under a social accountability campaign revealed that a number of towers that had been put up fell short of meeting the 5km macro-coverage radius requirement as specified in the bidding document.

Following an engagement with the Parliamentary Committee on Telecommunications, CUTS insisted that the issues with the erected towers needed to be addressed before the second phase of the project continued. In response to CUTS' findings, however, ZICTA stated that it was aware that the towers erected by Huawei Technologies Zambia were below the required standard, and as such indicated that the contractor would work on the towers again once the second phase of the project started.

As the government proceeds with the second phase of the project, CUTS is deeply concerned that the towers that will be erected in this phase will be plagued with the same inefficiencies as those erected in the initial phase. As such, what mechanisms has the government employed to ensure that the towers that will be erected in this phase will be continuously monitored for quality throughout the duration of this project? Additionally, how will the government ensure that the faulty towers that were erected during the first phase are corrected?

The project will see close to 500 new communication towers being built around the country. A significantly larger amount than the 200 towers that were erected during the first phase by Huawei Technologies therefore the stakes are significantly higher.

Mobile services are no longer a luxury good in Zambia. The results of a nationwide survey that was undertaken by CUTS indicated that 63 percent of all Zambian citizens that have mobile phones use them daily and 77 percent use them at least once a week. Given the increasing indispensability of mobile phones to the average Zambian, the government must ensure that resources spent on increasing access deliver as per the terms of the contract signed with the suppliers.

The mobile technology revolution has been widely regarded to have positive social and economic impacts on the lives of ordinary Zambians. As a result the government has an increased responsibility to begin ensure the provision of mobile services to Zambians across the country.

