Mobile Internet revolution targets Africa's rural areas

By Issa Sikiti da Silva   15 Oct 2009

After sweeping the urban population off its feet, the mobile Internet revolution is now targeting the rural areas of Africa, where more than 70% of the continent's 890 million people live in extreme poverty and in the fringes of society, thanks to governments' 'discriminatory' policies prioritising urban areas.

Mobile Web Africa

"Our future growth is going to be in the rural areas and it is going to be data besides the voice," Sean Paavo Krepp, of Nokia emerging markets services, told Bizcommuity.com yesterday, 14 October 2009 on the sidelines of the Mobile Web Africa conference.

"More and more people in Africa are subscribing to mobile networks every day more than anywhere in the world, and this shows that people are demanding information that could help their businesses and improve their lives," he said.

Work together to support rural development

"The key message for that revolution really taking place is affordability, however - the price of handsets and the general costs of telecommunications need to come down if we want to reach out to many people out there."

Krepp called on governments, NGOs, the private sector and the whole ecosystem to work together to support the development of rural communities.

Kenya's Ory Okolloh, Ushahidi executive director, echoed Krepp's sentiments. "The price of handsets must come down. 3G operating monopolies need to open up space to other competitors to make the product more affordable," she told Bizcommunity.com.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) said rural poverty is deepening in Africa, especially in Eastern and Southern Africa, where 10 of the 21 countries in the region have an average annual per capita income of less than US$400.

SA no exception

Even in South Africa, Africa's economic powerhouse, more than 18 million people live on less than R20 (about US$2.60) per day and the state of rural poverty has reached alarming proportions.

Okolloh believes, however, that despite their poverty, Africa's rural communities are willing to spend as long as they can discover the necessity of using mobile Internet.

So, the onus is on marketers to persuade network operators and cellphone service providers that they stand to benefit a lot and make a long-lasting impact in this 'isolated' but largely untapped market.

Literacy; exodus to cities remain problems

However, some delegates argued that unless challenges of illiteracy and rural exodus are overcome, the mobile Internet revolution will not reach its objectives.

"We have a serious problem when young people who are supposed to be giving some knowledge of mobile Internet to old or uneducated people go to stay in the city," Okolloh said.

"But as soon as rural populations discover the necessity of using mobile Internet, they will come along," she concluded.

Visit www.mobilewebafrica.com and www.ifad.org.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.
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