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Africa

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Mobile phones revolutionise Africa

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When it comes to mobile phones, Africa is truly avant-gardist. A new study shows that Africa is the first continent to have more mobile phone users than fixed-line subscribers. Mobile phones have revolutionised Africa during the last years: more Africans have begun using phones since 2000 than in the whole of the previous century.

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has presented new statistics on the telecom sector in Africa at the Africa Telecom conference, now taking place in the Egyptian capital, Cairo. Nothing less than a boom was described.

According to the ITU survey presented in Cairo, Africa has also become the world's fastest-growing mobile phone market. Over the past five years the continent's mobile phone use has increased at an annual rate of 65 percent, which is twice the global average. This is good news for telecom investors in Africa.

The actual growth in mobile phones has been far larger than expected by international experts and investors. A major reason for the boom is that Africa lags far behind other continents regarding fixed-line phone subscribers. Only 2.8 percent of Africans have ordinary phone services.

In the generally sparsely populated and extensive continent, where the majority population lives in poverty, the large costs of stringing up telephone wires so far has not been economically viable. Mobile phone networks, on the other hand, are much cheaper and faster to establish. As a result, some 6 percent of Africans now use mobile phones; more than double the number of fixed-line phone subscribers.

The establishment of mobile phone networks has also defied structures hostile to investments, warfare, failed states and natural disasters. Somalia, which has not had any central government for over a decade, has achieved a vibrant mobile industry. Mobiles have steadily advanced in Congo Kinshasa and Liberia despite heavy warfare. Instable Guinea-Bissau this year became the African nation to erect a mobile phone network.

This was because Africa's rapid growth of mobile phones is despite, not because of, policies adopted by governments, South African expert Alison Gillwald of the LINK centre at Witwatersrand University yesterday said at the Cairo conference. Her intervention directly contrasted with the ITU convenor of the conference, who had claimed that "policy and regulatory reforms are the primary reason for this phenomenal growth."

Enormous business and technical possibilities existed, but were constrained by present policy and regulatory constraints, she was quoted by 'Highway Africa News' as saying. Ms Gillwald said a new market structure with competitive incentives was needed, and it should be based on a fundamental review of how to increase investment in telecoms.

Ugandan Minister of Works, Housing and Communications, John Nasasira, told the Cairo delegates that, despite the rapid development, not all was well in Africa's telecom market. "Let's not forget the challenges and constraints we still face. More than 50 percent of Africans have never made a phone call," the Minister said.

He stressed that the biggest problem in Africa was a lack of affordable resources. "Over 50 percent of people on the continent earn less than one dollar a day and 40 percent are unemployed," Minister Nasasira yesterday was quoted as saying by 'Highway Africa News'.

Nevertheless, Mr Nasasira still believed in the importance of the burgeoning mobile networks on the continent. He says that when he took up office as a Minister in Uganda in 1999, he often faced criticism about the fact that there were more mobile connections than fixed line connections in the country.

- I was told this like I should feel guilty, he laughed, "But mobile phones are appropriate for the way we live in scattered villages and fixed lines are far more costly in terms of infrastructure."

The general impression was however of great optimism regarding the African telecom boom. "Africa has been able to leapfrog from having the most backward systems to taking advantage of the latest technologies," Vanessa Gray, an ITU spokesperson, told the Cairo delegates.

By staff writers

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