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Mobile phones join war on African poverty



Daniel Mashva heaves his sack of cabbages and sweet potatoes into a rickety shared taxi and travels nine hours under the scorching sun to the market in Johannesburg.

By the time he arrives, half his tiny harvest is rotten and the 48-year-old father of five returns to his impoverished village just a few pennies richer. That was before new cell phone technology changed his life.

Mashva now dials up to a virtual trading platform on his new high-tech phone and sells his produce direct from his small thatched hut on the fringe of the vast Kruger National Park.

"I check the prices for the day on my phone and when it's a good price I sell," he told reporters from his village in the remote Northeast of South Africa. "I can even try to ask for a higher price if I see there are lots of buyers."

Mashva is one of around 100 farmers in Makuleke testing cell phone technology that gives small rural farmers access to national markets via the Internet, putting them on a footing with bigger players and boosting profits by at least 30 percent.

"Mainstream farmers have access to market information so they can negotiate better prices. This cell phone enables poor rural farmers to get that same information," said Mthobi Tyamzashe, head of communications at South African cell phone operator Vodacom, which is sponsoring the project.

One of Mashva's neighbors said he had quadrupled his monthly income since using the phone, as he was now able to cut out a middle man who paid him far less than the market price for his cotton crop.

"Last year was really a disaster, I made around 800 rand (\$120) a month and was having trouble feeding my family," Jeremiah Chauke told reporters. "But last month I made around 4,000 rand -- that's a lot of bucks."

Chauke has invested some of that extra cash into growing vegetables on a small plot of land near his house, which he also sells using his phone.

Like almost half of Africans, neither Chauke nor Mashva had made a phone call let alone surfed the Web before receiving their new phones. But both are now hooked and deftly maneuver their high-tech handsets with pride.

Cell phone use has rocketed 100 percent in the world's poorest continent since 2000, and the Makuleke scheme is one of many ways the technology is being used to tackle poverty.

Experts say wireless technology is also the best way to bring the Internet to the poor, mainly because inhospitable and sparsely populated African landscapes mean rolling out landline infrastructure is not commercially viable.

Senegalese company Manobi, which operates online systems for businesses in the developing world, first launched the trading platform for farmers and fishermen in the west African nation, and says it has signed up 40,000 customers there.

"It's a trading platform and a business space," said Manobi Chief Executive Daniel Annerose. "Small Senegalese farmers even linked up with the French army (on the platform) last year and agreed to supply one of their ships when it docked in Dakar."

Manobi has teamed up with French cell phone manufacturer Alcatel and Vodacom to launch the project in South Africa, where it hopes 100,000 farmers

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will use the system if the Makuleke pilot project takes off. After that, they want to push into the rest of the continent and the Middle East.

In Senegal, a team of Manobi employees collect 80,000 data from 10 markets per day and get it on line within a few seconds, while in the more mature market of South Africa the company simply uploads existing information onto their system.

Farmers can access the information on a web-based trading platform via Internet-enabled phones, or can request prices and make trades via SMS, or text message.

Local business like safari lodges and restaurants also have access to the platform so they can order from farmers direct.

Vodacom and Alcatel freely admit they do not sponsor projects like this out of the goodness of their hearts -- the aim is to expand the cell phone market into rural areas and to sign up new customers before the competition.

"The idea is that if people start off with your product they will stay with it once they become more profitable clients," said Vodacom's Tyamzashe.

Vodacom has provided 360 starter packs and airtime vouchers worth 300 rand each, while Alcatel has stumped up 200 handsets.

But the key question is whether farmers often living on less than \$1 a day be able to afford to surf the Web on their phones once free airtime runs out.

Experts say projects like this are often hit-and-miss and that Makuleke may not turn out to be sustainable, but that it was important to keep trying ways of improving communications in rural areas of Africa.

"Individual projects like this may not be sustainable, but in a wider context it is an important part of getting telecoms out to the rural areas," said telecommunications expert Arthur Goldstuck, from research group World Wide Worx.

"It is a case of throwing all kinds of things at the wall and hoping that some of it works."

Mashva is optimistic his phone will generate enough extra cash to pay for the calls.

"I will get the money to pay for it when I sell my products," he said with a grin.

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