

Sierra Leone: Rapid growth for mobile sector

Posted on Wednesday 26 September 2007 - 16:14

Bai-Bai Sesay, AfricaNews reporter in Freetown, Sierra Leone,
photo: Lindsay Stark

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" I' ll text you a Valentine message." " Will you buzz me after work, I will call you." These are common conversational phrases for mobile users in Sierra Leone, a country rated today as the least developed and poorest nation in the African continent according to a recent UNDP index.



Sierra Leone lagged behind in the new cellular phone system because of the war. It happened that the African continent was opening to mobile phone providers at a time when Sierra Leoneans were under a civil war siege. This was to change with the declaration of peace.

While other GSM companies were jittery about the country's newly announced peace after a protracted and bloody ten year armed conflict, Mobitel, a GSM service provider made the first breakthrough in the Sierra Leonean market when they established their company in war torn Sierra Leone leaving the wounds of war in 2000. This took place at a time when the country's government owned land phone company Sierratel was only operating in some parts of the city after rebel forces vandalized transmitters and cables.

Today, Sierra Leone has a lot of subscribers and numerous GSM service providers. This number is increasing daily. It is no secret that Sierra Leone has one of the largest mobile network services although said to be the least developed country in the West African Sub-Region.

Although the number of mobile phone subscribers has increased from the hundreds in 2000 to thousands in 2003 in a population of about 4.5 million people – this still brings about half of the population still without the opportunity of owning or having access to telephones, and this number is usually found mostly in Sierra Leone's countryside.

In the rural areas of the country, few people have access to a

mobile phone. Quite apart from the fact that most people cannot afford it, the main problem is that of poor coverage due to lack of network.

“Sorry the number you have dialed does not exist or the person is out of the coverage area. You can try again later; this is one of the talking points for subscribers in most urban areas or even from abroad trying to reach their rural friends or relatives in the rural areas.

Madam Marie James who resides in Kassama Village in Bo District in Southern Sierra Leone said she dialed several times, trying to call her husband in Freetown but she said there was no network. But when she arrived in Bo, the second largest city in the country, she was able to make her call successfully.

Chernor Ojuku Sesay, Managing editor of the Pool newspaper whose birthplace is Masiaka in northern Sierra Leone said that there is no network to call his parents. Mr. Sesay who resides in Freetown said there is no proper network in that part of the country.

“I have bought a mobile phone for my old parents but I cannot communicate with them because whenever I call there is no network,” he says.

The Government run telecommunication company SIERRATEL does not provide GSM services. The company only issues licenses to mobile companies operating in the country. Economic analysts believe that giving private companies the opportunity to operate telephones companies in the country will help bolster the private sector. of the country. In line with the government’s goal of providing an environment suitable to investors, the efforts of the cellular networks operators are welcome.

But most of the mobile phone service providers are currently only operating in towns and cities; although rural areas are now contributing increasingly in the development of the country economy.

Since the war ended, government has put in place modalities in rural areas facilities in proving communication development policies. Currently there are community radio networks in most rural areas.

“Rural telecommunication services form another back bone both in the societies and economic development of any country; therefore for a country to develop, quality communication system is needed not only in urban areas but in rural areas as well where most of the inhabitants are living in abject poverty, as stated in one analyst.

The analyst further explained that “rural telecommunication services play a vital role in local governance and administration

by improving access to information at urban and rural levels.”

Currently, there are three mobile companies operating cellular networks in Sierra Leone. These are Mobitel, Celtel and Millicom.

Although Mobitel was the first company that started operating in the country, today; it has been sidelined in a stiff competition for subscribers and is now among the two others.

Celtel was established in Sierra Leone in 2000 and currently is one among the highest number of subscribers. It has expanded in main towns and cities, although a majority of the rural areas has no network, Celtel has plans underway to expand their coverage areas.

All the three mobile phones are using the same system of prepaid cards. This has caused a lot of complaints from a majority of mobile phone subscribers in the country as they have repeatedly questioned the reason why mobile phone service providers sell their cards in dollars and not in the country's local currency. When I talked to the marketing managers of three companies about this use, they stated that they are looking into the matter.

Dr. Prince Alex Harding, the former Minister of Transports and Communication in the past government said that government is encouraging investors not to pay their attention in urban areas but to expand their business in rural areas as well.

“We as a government are trying all out to encourage companies to invest in the rural areas and as such, mobiles companies too should deem it necessary to expand their network coverage in the entire country as they are making huge profits from the country.

Sierra Leone is divided into four provisional headquarters and twelve (12) districts. Majority of the districts have no network coverage's.

Millicom (SL) operating in Sierra Leone is one of the biggest mobile companies in the Africa continent, according to Aroun Strooge, spokesperson of the company: “The only government telecommunication company SIERRATEL which is responsible to give out licenses to private companies is reluctant to allow us to use sister lines so that the entire country will have network coverage. ”We are still working out modalities with them to give us the go ahead; we want the poor rural people to enjoy the facilities as well.”

“Although most of these rural areas are poor, the tendency for our company to derive income from those places will be difficult but as a company our priority is to expand our facility to the entire country.”

Alpha Sesay, Managing Director of SIERRATEL (Sierra Leone Telecommunication Company) says plans are underway to deepened communication in the entire country which will make mobile companies to reach the poor people in the rural areas.

“Right now, investors are considering the needs of the poor, although their business would not achieve profit. They can only make money from urban areas and no profit from the poor rural areas in the country”, said a village teachers in Masimera, Northern Sierra Leone.

Mr. Sallieu Kamara, information director of Network Movement for Peace and Development, a local NGO said no matter it would be difficult for a majority of the people to maintain and buy mobile phone especially in rural Sierra Leone where majority of them consider only food and shelter as a priority and not mobile phones.

Although Millicom (SL) is the second largest mobile company in Sierra Leone, they have the cheapest SIM pack at a cost of \$ 0.25 and a grace period of 45 days for Ten dollars cards as expiring days including an additional one month as a grace period. A local call on Millicom to Millicom is 0.8 cent while Millicom to Celtel is 0.25 cent and Millicom to Mobitel is 0.35 cent. Most of the subscribers both in urban and rural areas see these prices to be higher compared to the living conditions of the people of Sierra Leone who live on less than a \$1 dollar a day. In the provinces, where there is no electricity provided by the public energy and power utility company, mobile phones have to be recharged on stand by generators.

Celtel is operating public telephone boots and plans are underway to invest in rural areas by reducing telephone rate due to poor conditions in those areas.

The Sierra Leone Communications an Independent telecommunication regulator is also working on strategies to wipe out charging levy by mobile companies to buy phone cards in foreign currencies such as dollars.

Members of Parliament especially the Chairman of the Parliament Committee on Transport and Communication in the past government pointed out that mobile companies in the country are making huge profits especially when they are selling Sim Packs, mobiles and mobile cards in dollars which is contrary to the trade rules of Sierra Leone.

“Generally speaking the people of Sierra Leone especially in the capital city Freetown and the diamond rich town of Kono, eastern Sierra Leone are crazy for mobile phones.

There is a great success both for the mobile companies because they are making huge gains while the government is deriving less profit. However, rural people are expressing their views

that though the number of mobile companies are increasing, still the average rural person still lacks the opportunity to have access to mobile phones,” said a communication experts.

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