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## Mobile Africa - As Africa's smaller nations embrace advanced Internet mobile services, operators must cope with new pre-paid billing challenges

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**As Africa's smaller nations embrace advanced Internet mobile services, operators must cope with new pre-paid billing challenges** by *John Aalbers*  
2007-03-08 22:33:33 | Viewed **804** times

This article by John Aalbers, CEO VoluBill, highlights the growth of mobile telephony in Africa, the impact of growth in smaller African countries, and why cellular operators must cope with new pre-paid billing challenges that come with the growth.

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### Advances in Africa's micro nations



Africa's bigger economies always attract the world's attention- especially when it comes to the mobile phone business. To be fair, there is good reason for this interest. The growth rate for cellular services in places such as Nigeria, the DR Congo, South Africa and Tanzania is phenomenal and, by all accounts, worthy of several columns in a newspaper. According to statistics recently published by Informa Telecoms & Media, the African cellular market's annual growth rate over the next five years will exceed 22%, the highest of any world region. The forecast for markets in East and Central Africa combined will be 27% over the same period. The region's market now represents 15% of the continent's mobile users and has grown by 58% over the past year to reach nearly 18 million subscriptions. By the end of 2006, the East and Central Africa region will include 6 countries among the 15 largest African markets, with Kenya, DR Congo and Tanzania among the top ten.

These figures are impressive enough to keep foreign investment flowing into Africa over the next twenty years- despite the unique and often dangerous challenges that continue to confront the continent. What is not reported enough, however, is the quiet, advanced, mobile revolution taking place in Africa's smaller nations. While the bigger

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countries are signing up to basic mobile services, its tinier, less profiled neighbours are leaping ahead to successfully take on different cellular technologies at a faster pace. For places like Cameroon, Senegal and Mauritius, mobile phones are not just being used to make a call but to access next generation services and, ultimately, to revolutionise the way people do business and live their lives.

### Bringing communities closer

One example of the personal, transformative powers of advanced mobile telephony can be found in Senegal, where farmers are using mobile Internet access to find out the prices of produce before they travel to the market and to determine whether their crop is in short supply at a particular place. Before this innovation, middlemen would frequently take advantage of this lack of knowledge and offer to buy crops at prices far lower than farmers would get if they travelled to market themselves. And the difference in price is absolutely extraordinary. One farmer using the Internet mobile service found that he could get more than twice as much for grapefruit than the amount he was offered by the middle men.

This Internet service is made possible by a grassroots organisation called Manobi that independently collects prices and uploads them to its central database using mobile phones that dial in to the server via WAP. The availability of this WAP technology in Senegal has led to a drastic improvement to rural communities, which make up 70 percent of the country's total population. The agricultural economy is also improving for the better because the ability to know what markets need in advance is having an effect on the way farmers grow crops.

Meanwhile, on the tiny island of Mauritius, the wireless boom continues to grow along with its customer's desire for more sophisticated new services. The country boasts the highest mobile telephone penetration level in all of Africa and operators have upgraded most of their telephony networks to ensure that customers get 100 per cent reliability for services usually available only in the western world. They include advanced next generation applications such as 3G, Video-On-Demand, Internet connection and Wi-Fi. More recently the country's leading mobile operator announced the arrival of mobile phone television, enabling subscribers who possess the 3G technology to receive up to 10 of the nation's top TV channels.

### Mobile Internet Revolution

Over in Cameroon, local Internet Service Provider Douala.1 has launched a wireless broadband product called Kikao using T-CDMA and it looks set to transform the local mobile market. Douala 1 is offering the first T-CDMA wireless broadband service on the continent outside of South Africa and plans to have 5,000 subscribers and to offer the service in all five of Cameroon's major cities by the end of this year.

Orange Cameroon has also hinted of an Internet telephony boom with the recent acquisition of VoluBill's flexible data solutions. According to an agreement signed by France's biggest mobile network provider, Orange will deploy VoluBill's technology to enable the company to quickly implement mobile services and pricing when required. The solutions will also provide revenue generating support for Orange's new wireless data offerings such as WAP and other General Packet Radio Services (GPRS).

What's remarkable about operators working in these aforementioned countries is that their future outlook on advanced mobile services also includes the realisation that their network must also be up to scratch to support new innovations. This is especially true for pre-paid customers- which make up the bulk of African mobile users. The future rise of advanced mobile services in smaller, emerging economies means that carriers need to be prepared if they are to deliver profitable, value-added services such as mobile

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content to the masses. It also requires far more flexibility and greater ability to monitor, control and charge for complex services such as video downloading or Internet access.

So how will operators charge farmers in Senegal for downloading information about crop prices at the local market? How will operators in Mauritius succeed in offering cheap downloads of television programs to its customers while enjoying maximum profitability?

Indeed, the complexity for charging and giving customers what they want -WITHOUT losing money- is greater than it's ever been for operators. That is why monitoring and controlling of traffic generated by VoIP based innovations such as 3G is crucial for Africa's operators and can only be established with a real-time monitoring and charging technology that can track the customer's use of services. Real-time is KEY to making things work in this new mobile environment.

Fortunately for the mobile business world, technological advances have been made to enable carriers to gain a greater understanding of their pre-paid customers' habits while providing them with clear pricing options in real time - whenever and however they want. And, surprisingly enough, many operators across Africa have already started to upgrade their networks to accommodate the need for this type of business advantage. This includes carriers supporting services in smaller nations, such as Orange Cameroon and Orange Mauritius. Indeed the Internet wireless trend within the "micro" economies of Africa offer great opportunities for any telecoms software provider capable of offering successful billing and charging platforms.

### **Understanding the Technology**

But what exactly is rating and charging solutions and how do they work? How can they improve the life of a Senegalese farmer and keep the operators in the green? Simply put, real-time subscriber usage monitoring and charging applications are like a stalker on the network. They operate by monitoring and gathering information, in real time, of a user attempting to access a particular service, over protocols including a full range of peer-to-peer (p2p) protocols. P2P is a communications model in which each party has the same capabilities and either party can initiate a communication session- such as downloading a video file or sending a picture message via a mobile phone.

The information gathered by monitoring and charging application can immediately be used for operator applications such as reporting, charging, controlling access or revenue assurance. The information collected by many of today's solutions can help operators detect and act on applications that potentially undermine their overall revenue possibilities. This is achieved by enabling operators to block, restrict, re-route or charge users for traffic at a premium rate or on a subscription basis.

### **Enormous Potential**

With around 13% of the world's population and less than 3% of the world's telephone lines, Africa remains a continent of unequalled opportunity for telecommunications operators and charging and monitoring platform suppliers. Companies can capitalise on this potential even if they side step Africa's big nations- such as Nigeria or South Africa- by entering stable, new markets such as Mauritius, Senegal, Benin or Gambia- just a few of the many mobile trailblazing nations across the continent.

Indeed, managing strong levels of advanced mobile service growth in Africa will be a challenge, but with the right network infrastructure in place- such as rating and controlling technology- there is no reason why cellular operators working in smaller countries cannot enjoy a future of incredible

financial growth and prosperity. All it takes is a little bit of an investment up front on the part of the operator and, of course, the right support at the local level. With this winning combination investment will continue to pour in, helping to pave a new road of financial prosperity for many of Africa's nascent markets.

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### About the author

**John Aalbers** is the CEO of **VoluBill**

VoluBill [www.volubill.com](http://www.volubill.com) is the leading independent provider of real time charging, control and monitoring solutions for IP-based services. VoluBill's state of the art "on the wire" technology provides the basis for a range of high value, real time applications such as charging, control, monitoring, packet tagging and revenue assurance. Founded end of 2001, VoluBill is a privately owned company, backed by strong International investors (Deutsche Venture Capital, Sofinnova Ventures, Sofinnova Partners, Argo Global Capital and SPEF Ventures) with customer reference sites across the globe.

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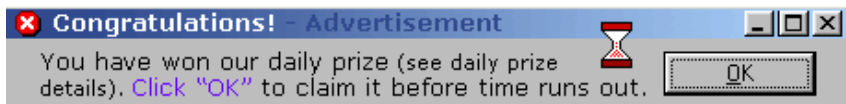
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