

Ericsson

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# Business Review

## GANDHI REVISITED

SAM PITRODA WANTS INDIA TO BUILD ITS OWN TECHNOLOGICAL ECOSYSTEM

What makes a grid smart

DON'T BE FOOLED BY THE GREEN LIGHTS

Television  
in the eye of its beholders

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FOR DIGITAL CONTENT

Opinion  
YOU'RE NOT AS CLEVER  
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PAGES THEME - HOW CONNECTED LEARNING IS TURNING EDUCATION UPSIDE DOWN

ERICSSON 

# Ericsson Business Review

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# Lessons on learning

How can technology help bring learning to everyone? Ericsson Business Review posed the question to three prominent **experts in the field of education** – each with his own vision of the classroom of the future.

**TEXT** Nicholas Smith



## Ken Banks: “We define innovation too narrowly”

Creator of FrontlineSMS, a mobile messaging application aimed at the grassroots nonprofit community, Ken Banks argues that development issues such as education require us to **start with the problem, not the technology**. In developing countries, most high-tech solutions just don't work.

### What role can mobile technology play in development?

Too many people today are disconnected from the world and the opportunities it offers. Many developing countries still lack landlines, and in many cases where the infrastructure does exist, it is often poorly maintained. Mobile networks open up the possibility of reaching communities that would otherwise miss out on any meaning-

ful connection with the rest of the world, and allow them to engage, make themselves heard and to be empowered by information.

Mobile phones are, of course, the main drivers here. This is the first time in history that billions of people have had a real-time, immediate digital communication channel that is cheap, portable and easy to use. And for development projects looking to widen public access to ►

## MIT pushing the boundaries of online learning

► Students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) pay thousands of dollars for courses, but now anyone, anywhere can take MIT courses online free of charge – and earn official certificates.

Ten years ago, MIT began leading the way in online learning by posting course materials from almost all of its classes. Its free OpenCourseWare includes nearly 2,000 courses and has been used by more than 100 million people. The new MITx interactive online learning platform will go further, giving students access to online laboratories, self-assessments and student-to-student discussions.

For an affordable fee, students will be able to receive a document stating that they have demonstrated an understanding of a given topic. Although they are not MIT degrees, these documents will be legitimate credentials bearing the name of a new nonprofit body to be created within MIT.

The MITx learning platform will eventually host a virtual community of learners around the world and will be accompanied by an MIT-wide research initiative on online teaching and learning, including grading by computer.

► education, to give just one example, mobile phones can enable them to reach out to people who would previously have been beyond reach. But it is not development organizations or even governments that have made this happen; the private sector is ultimately responsible for much of the rollout of mobile phone networks in the developing world, and many operators are making healthy sums of money by doing so.

**You have been involved in many fruitful mobile-centered development initiatives. What separates the successful projects from the unsuccessful ones?**

The single most important thing is starting with the problem and not the technology. It is quite common for people to grab the latest smartphone or iPad or whatever happens to be hot at the moment and try to figure out how it could be used in a development context. This approach can work, but most of the time it is destined to fail. If you go in with technology as your main objective, you will end up shoehorning it into contexts where it will not always work. The solution to a development question could be pencils or paper – it does not necessarily need to have anything to do with ICT.

I think that the correct sequence should instead be problem-people-technology. By “people” I mean the individuals at the grassroots who usually understand the problem better than anybody else. Many outside projects bulldoze their way in and try to modernize everything from scratch without stopping to ask for advice. The schools, churches and cooperatives that have been there for a long time and better understand the culture and geography are often not spoken to or listened to.

**Does the Western world have too much faith in the power of ICT to drive development?**

The problem is that the West views innovation in a fairly narrow sense. The focus is almost exclusively on high-tech solutions, but most of this technology simply does not work in the places that need most developmental help, whether that means education, health care or something else. Technologies like tablets or 4G networks that the West sees as innovative and exciting are just not applicable to rural areas in developing countries. So we need a big mindset shift, where we stop seeing innovation exclusively in our own terms and realize that local solutions to some problems may actually work best. Perhaps we should be scaling these solutions rather than thinking about how we can scale our own.

**You referred earlier to the crucial role played by private enterprise in bringing mobility to the developing world. How do you see this role evolving in the future?**

“Operators often get quite a hard time from development organizations, although I think that some of this criticism is unjustified. On the one hand, issues such as the high cost of mobile services in areas where people do not have enough

money or delays in network rollout in rural regions with small populations certainly need to be addressed. But on the other hand, it is unfair to expect businesses to act like charities, and I believe that the development sector is very lucky that the mobile industry exists and can make money from what it is doing.

Operators are doing a better job than anybody else of meeting the insatiable demand for mobile technology, and the development sector has many more opportunities to make a positive difference as a result. In fact, there is probably space for operators to get even more involved in development issues.

**What kind of relations do operators and non-profit organizations have at present?**

A lot of nonprofits never get an answer when they try and contact operators. The reason is that there is a “thousand flowers blooming” scenario right now, where the number of development projects just keeps on rising. If representatives of each of these projects knock on an operator’s door asking for free minutes or text messages, it quickly becomes unmanageable. Operators do not have the time to speak to everybody, and in many cases the project scale is too small. The development sector requires a coordinated effort, where everybody gets together to determine the aggregate value of what they need, and then makes a common case to the operators.

**Is this united front realistic?**

The nonprofit world is as competitive as the business world. Everybody is chasing the same funds, and each project tries everything possible in an attempt to look better than the others. There is a fear that if everybody gets together then everybody ends up looking the same. I hope it does materialize, however. Development organizations really should stop assuming that they only need to turn up on an operator’s doorstep and they will automatically be given everything they need for free.

**Until developing countries are in a position to develop their own solutions, is mobile technology not just another form of aid from the West?**

Sometimes it is, yes. But if we take Africa as an example, there is more local innovation today than ever before – just look at the iHub incubator in Nairobi or the new technology centers springing up in Ghana and South Africa. The numbers are still low, but three or four years ago there was practically nothing at all. There is a general realization that the best place to develop technology solutions for Africa is in Africa, and a clear sign of this change in mindset is the number of people who are now choosing to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities at home rather than leaving for the West. Although development continues to be dominated by the West bringing in technologies to the developing world, in five years’ time it might just be the other way around. ●