

‘Mobile Technology and Innovation: An African Perspective’



Picture courtesy of Ken Banks: Mobile technology being utilized in Uganda

Mobile phones are perhaps not the first thing that comes to mind when we think of life in economically developing countries. Yet anyone who works in the developing world will have noticed that ownership of mobiles has increased dramatically in recent years.

Ken Banks, who came to speak at the Humanitarian Centre on Monday 26th October, saw the potential for using this increasingly available technology for social change in the developing world. With a background in IT and many years working in Africa, Ken was well placed to explore the possibilities.

Availability has increased because handsets have become cheaper, and whilst still expensive for those on low wages, mobiles are desirable – and useful – enough for people to save up for them. In Africa there was a leap in mobile ownership after pay-as-you-go sim cards became available – suddenly there was no need to provide identification papers, have a bank account or commit to a contract.

Many organisations attempting to use information technology for development have relied on the internet as a platform, but in most parts of rural Africa internet connections are unavailable. By contrast, mobile coverage is much better and provides a direct line of communication with even remote communities.

In 2005 Ken developed FrontlineSMS, a piece of software that utilises text messaging as a mass communication device. Requiring only a laptop and a mobile – and, crucially, no internet connection – the software allows instantaneous two-way communication between implementing groups and recipients. With no expert knowledge needed, the tool can be used by virtually anyone, anywhere.

Ken is a humble and inspiring speaker, and his enthusiasm for the technology is infectious. By making the software freely available, Ken has empowered agencies to put it to their own use. From small community groups to large NGOs, the applications of FrontlineSMS have gone beyond what Ken could ever have imagined and are in use in many countries that he himself has never visited. From security updates for aid workers in unstable regions, to reminding tuberculosis patients to take their medication, the software has benefited thousands of people all over the world.

Ken showed a video made by a Philippine doctor, giving thanks for how FrontlineSMS has transformed his mobile clinic now that he can alert people when it is coming. Such a gesture is testament to how much the tool is valued. Ken does not class himself as a social entrepreneur – indeed FrontlineSMS is donor-funded – but as an agent for social innovation at a grassroots level, empowering people by giving them tools that they can apply to their own problems.

For more on Ken Banks and mobile technology for development, visit www.kiwanja.net

For more on FrontlineSMS, visit www.frontlinesms.com

This talk was part of a series run by the Humanitarian Centre on social enterprise in international development. Future speakers at The Humanitarian Centre will cover engaged ethical consumerism (2nd November: Lynn Cunningham, from Hotel Chocolat) and wind turbines and sustainable energy use in China (9th November: Dr. Jim Platts, from Cambridge University). See our events calendar at www.humanitariancentre.org for details.

Produced for www.humanitariancentre.org

By Holly Edwards