

Catching the mobile wave

Ken Banks, IDG News

It was August, 1993. I had just returned from a five-week trip to Zambia helping build teaching accommodation, a project which, at the time, was part of a wider Zambian government attempt to stop the academic brain drain across into Tanzania. My day job back home was relatively uneventful, working for a private IT company providing a range of services to small and medium sized businesses. At that time, my knowledge of Africa and international development were minimal, but I was fascinated and wanted to learn more. I was curious about what I'd seen, concerned that so little seemed to be working and inspired to find out if there was anything someone with an IT background could do. Those five weeks were the first step of a journey which saw me travel to Africa on several further occasions, take a university degree and finally, exactly ten years after the journey began, start kiwanja.net.

My search for what works has taken me to many countries, some many times. Zimbabwe, Uganda, South Africa, Mozambique, Nigeria, Cameroon and Kenya have turned into temporary homes at various stages while I carried out hospital building projects, ran a primate rehabilitation centre, worked on biodiversity surveys and took part in several research trips looking at how ICT, and emerging mobile technology in particular, played out in the developing world. Back in 2003/2004, backed by Vodafone, I co-authored one of the earlier studies on the role of mobiles in international conservation and development. It was ridiculously early days, a time when the potential for the technology was still far from clear. Good case studies were scarce (but growing), much evidence was anecdotal and the backdrop to all of this was a widely-held view that most poor people in the developing world were never going to be able to afford a phone anyway. How things have changed.

Technology revolutions come and go, almost as if passing by silently in the night. I missed out on the personal computer revolution after turning down a job in the fledgling industry when I was just sixteen. I spent the dotcom boom years studying anthropology and development at Sussex University in the UK, only to finally get to Silicon Valley several years after all the easy money had dried up. I'd drawn up sketchy plans for a mobile phone-based payments system in 2004, and a mobile environmental sensing device the following year, only to see other people turn their own, similar ideas, into reality. Missing the boat was becoming a habit.

The mobile revolution has been one wave I have managed to catch, however, and without doubt we now find ourselves right in the middle of one of the greatest communication revolutions of all time. Growth has been so rapid that many markets have already become saturated, with attention increasingly turning to the developing world and consumers at the Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP). Conditions here, however, are often much different and simple technology transfer doesn't work so well.

Mobile innovation in the West is largely technology-lead, with service providers and network operators keen to push the latest and greatest into the hands of the consumers before they've worked out whether they really want it or not. Multimedia messaging (MMS) and video calling are two cases in point, launched to great fanfare but since largely ignored by the mobile-buying public. By contrast, in many developing countries and particularly at the BOP, innovation is governed by cultural, geographical and economic constraints, not a "technology for technology's sake" mentality. Unusually for large international companies, understanding the complex dynamics of emerging markets has become a central focus of their work, so much so that many are becoming more and more involved in issues which belong more in the realms of international development – gender, poverty and literacy, among many others – than in telecommunications. An emerging multi-disciplinary approach seems to be the order of the day.

With that in mind, this column will explore the impact of technology on the African continent from a unique viewpoint. Not from a purely technical perspective, or purely developmental or anthropological one, but at the intersection of all three. This is where things are most interesting. Just ask the handset manufacturers and network operators.

Over the coming weeks and months I hope you will join me in this journey. The mobile revolution is real and it's happening now. Don't let it pass *you* in the night...

Ken Banks, founder of kiwanja.net, devotes himself to the application of mobile technology for positive social and environmental change in the developing world, and has spent the last 15 years working on projects in Africa. Recently, his research resulted in the development of FrontlineSMS, a field communication system designed to empower grassroots non-profit organisations. Ken graduated from Sussex University with honours in Social Anthropology with Development Studies and is currently working on a number of mobile projects funded by the Hewlett Foundation. Ken was awarded a Reuters Digital Vision Fellowship in 2006, and named a Pop!Tech Social Innovation Fellow in 2008. Further details of Ken's wider work are available on his website at www.kiwanja.net