

Mobile phones play role in Zimbabwe

Ken Banks, IDG News

Mobile phones are revolutionising communications across the globe, more so in developing countries where landline infrastructure is lacking in many rural and urban areas. Mobile phones represent the only means of communication for hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people.

At the same time, mobiles have opened up huge economic opportunities for their owners. They can now be more easily contacted when work is available, they can use them to advertise their services, receive market prices and even get job openings. Others now make a living 'sharing' their phones and charging non-owners to make calls. Some make a living charging phone batteries, selling top-up vouchers, or covers and chargers. Patients receive reminders to take their medicine, saving time and money travelling to local clinics. National parks communicate details of dangerous animals, providing an early warning system to mitigate against human/wildlife conflict. Young people living in the slums of Nairobi receive texts alerting them to job opportunities in the city.

There is little doubt that mobile technology is proving incredibly empowering, so much so that the international development community now sees them as a key tool in helping alleviate global poverty. At a time when many people believe that access to information and communication technologies (ICT) should be a basic human right, mobile phones offer the best opportunity yet to help close the digital divide which prevents it.

But mobile phones aren't everyone's friend. To dictators and leaders of oppressive regimes, mobiles are often seen as more of a nuisance, as disruptive and something to be wary of, to fear and control. These ubiquitous little devices have already been responsible for the downfall of a number of leaders, most noticeably Philippine President Joseph Estrada who was eventually forced from office in early 2001 following text message-fuelled mass demonstrations in Manila.

With democracy finding itself increasingly under pressure around the world, the mobile phone is becoming increasingly seen as a tool which may help stop the rot. My interest in the subject centres on the use of a text messaging hub I developed back in 2005, which has since been used by a number of human rights organisations, particularly Nigeria last year to monitor the Presidential elections, in Pakistan during the recent state of emergency, and now in Zimbabwe during the current election crisis.

Media interest in the subject also on the rise, with a recent article in [The Economist](#) examining the use of mobile technology in political activism around the world. Its description of the battle between these activists and governments as a game of "cat and mouse" could not be more accurate, and continues to draw parallels today with events in Zimbabwe and Tibet.

When oppressive regimes put a stranglehold on the local media, and actively set out on campaigns of misinformation, activists turn to whatever tools they can to try and address the balance. Increasingly, these tools are becoming mobile-based – camera phones which capture images of beatings and civil rights abuses, and text messages co-ordinating and informing citizens are just two examples of an increasing use of the technology as activists try to keep up and, in increasing cases, stay one step ahead, of the opposition.

Mobile technology is today playing a growing role in Zimbabwe, a country with a largely state-owned media and a President unwilling to relinquish power. The future of the country continues to hang on a knife edge, as it seems to have done for the past two weeks (or the past few years, depending on your perspective). Like many people with an interest in the country, and like many others with friends or relatives living and working there, I've been closely following events on TV and online. International news sites such as the [BBC](#) have been as good as ever, but I've also been spending increasing amounts of time on local sites which, I feel, often give a 'truer', more personal sense of what's going on. One of the best sites for this has been [Kubatana.net](#)

Back in the summer of 2006 I was fortunate to spend three weeks in Zimbabwe working with them. A local NGO seeking to promote human rights and good governance, Kubatana were the very *first* users of my [FrontlineSMS](#) software when it launched back in 2005, starting a trend which has seen the software used for [similar activities](#) in a number of other countries around the world. In their own words, FrontlineSMS finally opened up the possibilities for text messaging in their work. This is what they've been doing.

In addition to an election line which gives the latest news to citizens via SMS (text message), they have been running a **"What would you like a free Zimbabwe to look like?"** initiative. Zimbabweans have been incredibly responsive, with many people saying that the question gave them hope in uncertain times. According to Kubatana:

"It's also been a real learning experience for us, reminding us that ordinary Zimbabweans have a wealth of good ideas to contribute, and our political and civic leadership must work on building a more participatory environment"

A combination of SMS and email were used in the initiative, with text messages such as **"Kubatana! No senate results as at 5.20 pm. What changes do YOU want in a free Zim? Lets inspire each other. Want to know what others say? SMS us your email addr"** sent out to their mobile subscriber lists. FrontlineSMS was used to blast the messages out, and then used collect responses which were then distributed via an electronic newsletter and on the [Kubatana Community Blog](#).

According to Kubatana, *"Without FrontlineSMS we would not have been able to process the volume of responses we have received, and we would not have been able to establish a two-way SMS communications service in the way that we have"*.

In the event of a Presidential run-off, Kubatana plan to produce a broadsheet with the feedback they've received from Zimbabweans in order to remind them what each other wanted, and to inspire them to go out and vote (again). After the election, they hope to produce a booklet with a page on some of these ideas and include an editor's comment, a cartoon or even a set of postcards carrying the most unique, original and practical ideas.

Unlike the Nigerian elections, where [FrontlineSMS](#) was used as a monitoring tool, in Zimbabwe it has been effectively used to mobilise and inform civil society *during* and *after* the election process. In both cases, the real success story has been the NGOs themselves - [NMEM](#) in Nigeria and Kubatana in Zimbabwe - who have both demonstrated the power of mobile technology in civil society initiatives, and what can be done when the right tools make it into the hands that need them the most.

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 currently divides his time between Cambridge (UK) and Stanford University in California on a MacArthur Foundation-funded Fellowship. 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](#)