

Nokia: From technical development to human development?

Ken Banks, IDG News

It's official. Or so it seems. Already the most active handset manufacturer in the developing world, Nokia this week made an announcement which places it well and truly at the heart of the international development effort. It's a move which mirrors their 'developed world' strategy – a move from out-and-out hardware supplier to one of a more inclusive services-based outfit. As if (very) successfully designing and building low-cost handsets for emerging markets wasn't enough, Nokia will now start offering emerging-market specific *data* services through their low-cost phones. And we're not talking music or games here. We're talking agriculture and education, and that's just for starters.

According to Nokia's official [Press Release](#):

"In 2002, Nokia unveiled a strategy to lower the cost of owning and operating a mobile phone and to bring the benefits of mobile telephony to people in emerging markets. Today, we are expanding that vision by introducing a number of devices and services that aim to bring the power of the Internet to these markets as well. The mobile device and the Internet are a powerful combination in connecting people with each other, accessing information, news, entertainment and sharing. By introducing products and services that are affordable, relevant and easy-to-use, we believe Nokia can fuel the growth of the Internet in emerging markets through mobility"

The announcement is interesting on a number of fronts. In addition to their move into 'social mobile' services – something previously the domain of the ICT4D community and a handful of innovative companies who managed to figure out working business models – Nokia also announced "Mail on Ovi" which enables Series 40 users to set up and run email accounts without the need to go anywhere near a personal computer. The mobile browsing world is also set for a shake-up with the announcement of new low-cost internet-enabled handsets, including the Nokia 2323 Classic with a price point of just €40.

A little over a year ago, in a post called [The Digital Divider](#), I made the point:

"The opportunity at the bottom of the pyramid is huge, and handset manufacturers and network providers alike are working hard to fill it with phones. For them, the most important issue is cost because that's what's most important to their customer. And if this means providing trimmed-down handsets at the lowest possible prices then so be it. This current reality sees many of these phones with no GPRS, no browser, no Java, no camera, no colour screen - the very technologies which form the lynchpin of our plans to promote the mobile phone as the tool to help close the digital divide"

The emergence of feature-rich sub-\$50 handsets isn't necessarily a game changer on its own, but it's a significant step in the right direction. Cheap as it may be, even the Nokia 2323 Classic is still around \$25 off target from a comfortable price-point for many BOP customers, assuming they're among the

target audience. The [shared phone culture](#) in many developing markets could of course come to the rescue, allowing a single web-enabled phone to open up web access for many people, assuming shared phone functionality (private bookmarks, cookies, browsing history, and so on) is made available. It's not clear whether this has been.

It's the addition of [Nokia Life Tools](#) – agricultural and educational services – which raises eyebrows almost as much as it raises the bar. How will Nokia's move into providing agricultural data and advice to farmers effect, for example, the operations of [Trade At Hand](#), [DrumNet](#), [Manobi](#) or [TradeNet](#)? Will they be partners in any Africa-wide venture? (Nokia do seem to be developing a habit of going-it-alone - more recently with their release of [Nokia Data Gathering](#) - rather than working with established, existing open source tools). For now, Nokia Life Tools will only be available in India, giving everyone - including Nokia - plenty of time to see how this thing plays out:

"Nokia Life Tools is a range of innovative agriculture information and education services designed especially for rural and small town communities in emerging markets. Nokia Life Tools helps overcome information constraints and provides farmers and students with timely and relevant information. These services use an icon-based, graphically rich user interface that comes complete with tables and which can even display information simultaneously in two languages. Behind this rich interface, SMS is used to deliver the critical information to ensure that this service works wherever a mobile phone does, without the hassles of additional settings or the need for GPRS coverage. Nokia plans to launch the service in the first half of 2009 with the Nokia 2323 classic and the Nokia 2330 classic as the lead devices in India, and expand it across select countries in Asia and Africa later in 2009"

What's particularly interesting from a technical standpoint is Nokia's snub of GPRS in favour of SMS. With data connectivity still patchy at the best of times, and confusion surrounding configuration and price plans, text messaging once again demonstrates its ability to remain relevant.

So, what next? Nokia develop a mobile payments platform and embed the client into all of their emerging market handsets? Imagine, a single company controlling the entire mobile technology value chain would make interesting viewing. It could well be the answer to the age old fragmentation problems suffered by the "social mobile" and ICT4D space, but would this give the Finnish giant Google-esque powers?

These are interesting times. And for once, it's the users at the bottom of the pyramid who stand to gain 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](#)