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Author / organisation	Huffington Post
Year recorded	2008
Region	Africa
Category	Economic
Archive page	kiwanja.net/mobile-database/wireless-africa/

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Naabala is a traditional East African Maasai warrior. He has a bright red shukha blanket draped over his shoulder and a baton-like weapon, called a conga, tucked in his belt. As we walk together, his many necklaces jangle as he tells us about his first lion hunt - at the age of 16 - stopping only to show us which plants cure fever and which ones are poisonous.

Then our mini-culture lesson comes to an abrupt end when something very unexpected happens - Naabala's cell phone rings. We look at each other and smile at just how out of place his blue Motorola seems in this very rural African setting.

But that's part of a new reality spreading across the continent. From Angola to Zambia, cell phone towers are now as much a part of the landscape as acacia trees and zebra herds. In fact, Africa is the world's fastest growing cell phone market.

From 1999 to 2004, mobile subscribers in the continent skyrocketed from 7.5 million to more than 76 million. By the end of the decade, that number is expected to double.

Everyone from government officials to rural mommas are going wireless, connecting people at an unprecedented pace. In a continent where remote villages are often cut off from one another, landlines are rare and unreliable, and hand-delivered messages can take days, the implications of this technological revolution are huge.

The boom started last decade when many African nations privatized phone service and mobile operators began selling inexpensive phone cards. At the same time, used phones from places like Canada and the United States went on sale for as little as $20.

Millions of people - most of whom didn't even have access to a landline - jumped at the chance of having their own phone. Those who couldn't afford one at least knew someone they could borrow one from.

So now rural farmers can call and check prices at local markets to ensure they get a fair deal for their produce, remote healthcare workers can contact city hospitals in an emergency and small business owners can increase sales by keeping in touch with their customers.

The continent has quickly become much smaller.

Of course, Africa isn't the only place bridging the digital divide. In 1997, Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus co-founded a mobile service in Bangladesh called GrameenPhone. It provides low-cost cell phones to people in rural communities who use them to set up their own telephone companies.

The service quickly spread as local entrepreneurs - mostly women - began selling phone service to other villagers. Now rural women are running their own simple telecom businesses from wooden shacks on the side of dirt roads.

A decade later, 10 million people are able to contact distant relatives, find out about employment opportunities and even conduct their own banking - all for the first time.

Back in Africa, similar programs are springing up to help tackle the continent's many challenges. Last year leading mobile companies, as well as the U.S. government, announced a $10 million project which will allow healthcare workers in 10 African countries to enter critical HIV/AIDS information from the field into a central database using a standard cell phone.

And in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, rural women have been given cell phones to report human rights violations, as well as spousal abuse.

Despite this growth, only 60 per cent of the continent is covered by a mobile signal. That number is rising though, and as it does, so too do the chances for further social and economic development.

In 2004, then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Commission for Africa released a report called The Impact of Mobile Phones in Africa, which highlighted the success of cell phones in the continent and outlined the possibilities for the future.

"The poor will benefit from improved services and will be empowered by opportunities to engage with government structures," the report said. "In the long term, it will be the norm for government departments to use portable technologies to deliver public and pro-poor services."

So as we move ahead into the digital age, technology can continue to be a brick in the path to development. Of course, medicine, infrastructure and food are still needed most, but technology can serve as a second tier of development on which to build for the future.

And it changes the face of empowerment. Cell phones are giving people control of their own progress - which they didn't have before - and they are finding innovative ways to help themselves.

Rural Africans are gaining a voice, and using their cell phones to make it heard.

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