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# APPLAB UGANDA

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# Google joins push to send Ugandans vital information through their mobiles

## AppLab will give millions of Africans access to health advice, farming tips and trading services using only a mobile handset

**Bobbie Johnson**, San Francisco
guardian.co.uk, Monday 29 June 2009 14.05 BST

AppLab staff member Bridget, right, shows fishermen the response they received to their weather query. Photograph: Pia Raffler/IPA /Grameen Foundation

It has already conquered the web, becoming one of the most powerful companies in the world in the process. But now internet giant Google is taking on a new challenge, joining the launch of a system aimed at helping some of the world's poorest people – by pumping information to their mobile phones.

The project – known as AppLab – is launching today in Uganda, giving millions of phone users access to health advice, farming tips and trading services using only a mobile handset.

The system allows users to send a text message asking for information on a number of subjects, with the answers returned by SMS in a manner not dissimilar to a web search.

Users can use AppLab to request health advice – including information on HIV, Aids or other illnesses – or find nearby health clinics or medical services. Farmers, meanwhile, are offered a selection of useful data including weather forecasts and agricultural tips.

Another part of the system allows Ugandan users to list items for sale or find things to buy from local merchants, enabling them to trade more effectively in their communities.

"With the explosion in mobile phone ownership, we saw the

tremendous potential in developing innovative approaches for providing information through mobile services that can benefit the poor," said Joseph Mucheru, the head of Google's operations in sub-Saharan Africa.

"Google's SMS technology is still evolving and we will continue to improve it over time, but what we are launching demonstrates the potential of this platform that can serve many more types of users in many countries."

The scheme has been orchestrated by the Grameen Foundation – a philanthropic spin-off of Grameen Bank, the pioneering developing world investment organisation founded by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus.

Google is providing SMS search technology, while the service is underpinned by MTN, the mobile phone operator headquartered in South Africa.

"Our core mission is to enable the poor to create a world without poverty ... technology has always played a key role in achieving this mission for us," said Peter Bladin, executive director at the Grameen Foundation. "We believe that access to the information and services that many of us take for granted will help alleviate poverty and empower poor and underserved communities."

Although Uganda is one of the world's poorest nations – with half of the population living on less than the internationally recognised poverty line of $1.25 (75p) a day – almost 10 million people in the country own a mobile phone.

That constitutes about a third of the population, but the number of phone users is actually much higher because handsets are often shared between family members or owned by so-called village phone operators. These local merchants rent out mobile phones as a replacement for phone kiosks – allowing individuals without their own handset to use phone services and contact relatives for a small fee.

Although pilot programmes suggest that the system will be largely used by those who own handsets, experts suggested that these village entrepreneurs will be a significant factor in driving up use.

Mobile services are becoming a hot topic in the developing world, where many countries are leapfrogging the traditional telecommunications system to develop services that work over the air.

In addition to information, the mobile has also become a banking tool in many remote areas. Phone credits are often used as a replacement for cash, and the ability to send and receive credit by phone has become a flexible replacement for traditional banking in a country such as Uganda, where just one in 10 citizens has their own bank account.

All the groups involved said they hoped to roll out the system in other countries across Africa, and other parts of the world, if it proves successful.

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