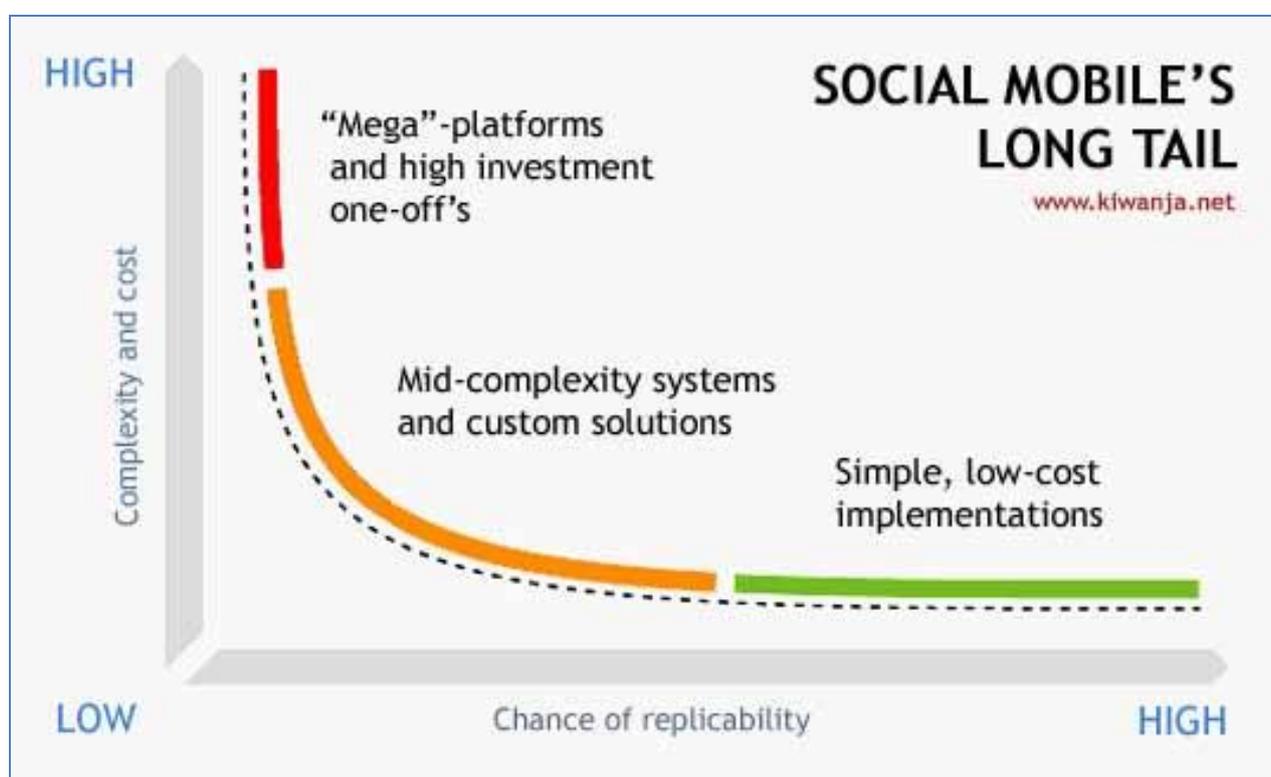


“Social mobile and the long tail”

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Erik Hersman at [White African](#) talked about it. [The Economist](#) also recently talked about it. And [Tactical Tech](#) are talking about it. Three commentators and a common theme, even if they don't realise it. What am I talking about? Social mobile's long tail, that's what.

There's no disputing that the mobile for good space is hotting up, with near-daily announcements extolling the virtue of mobile phones in promoting social and environmental good the world over. There are more reports than you could throw a mobile at, and conferences on the subject are being held left, right and centre (talking is one thing people seem to be good at). The problem is despite the excitement, in implementation terms at least, we're struggling to scratch the surface, meaning the majority of NGOs, particularly those in developing countries, can all but sit back in awe at the incredible things these little devices are doing. Solutions are tantalisingly close, but without the tools and a practical helping hand most of these NGOs remain passive observers. It's these - the ones who aren't yet able to do anything - that interest me the most. They also happen to be in the majority.



In my graph we have three categories. Firstly, there are high-end high-cost solutions running SMS services across national or international borders, with little chance of replicability for your average grassroots NGO. These are represented by the **red** part of the curve and generally get the highest amount of press exposure. Then we have lower-cost custom solutions, developed by individual (often mid-level) non-profits to solve a particular problem in a particular country or region, or to run a specific campaign. These have a *slightly* better chance of replicability for grassroots NGOs, are represented by the **amber**, and generally get a medium to high level of publicity.

Finally, we're left with the simple, low-tech, appropriate technology solutions with the highest opportunity for rapid, hassle-free replicability among grassroots NGOs, represented in **green** (even better, take out the need to replicate altogether and actually **give** them the tools to do the work, a gap **FrontlineSMS** is working hard to fill). These projects generally get the lowest level of publicity, if any, since few have an international profile of any kind. Notoriously hard to communicate with, and with little or no money, it's perhaps no surprise that most of the attention on the long tail is elsewhere.

In order for the mobile revolution to truly become a revolution, we need to be inviting infinitely more non-profits to the party. So much can be done, but so few are active in this space. Going by my thinking, that means we need to be working on the green, because that's where most grassroots NGOs sit, and that's where help is needed the most.

A recent **Economist** article listed a number of exciting uses of mobile technology among the activist community. What was most striking, however, was what *wasn't* there. Product names. Website addresses. Names. This is no fault of the author – this information rarely 'exists'. During a recent digital activism event in Istanbul, run by the Berkman Centre, this came across as a key topic of discussion. As one delegate put it, "If I want to provide fish prices, and want that **Kerala** fishing application I've heard about, how do I get it? What is it called? Who developed it?". In a staggeringly high number of use cases reported on the web, no product is mentioned, no website, no place for people to go to find out more. Replication is dead in the water. This is a real problem, and for many NGOs it's the biggest barrier to adoption. Sure, helping people understand what's possible is incredibly important, but only if something can happen next.

These problems are not new. Back in 2003/2004, during fieldwork for a project which was to become **t4cd**, it was already becoming clear to me that mobile technology had considerable potential for the grassroots NGO community. What was lacking then was a set of tools, and sadly little has changed. One organisation making a concerted effort to tackle the problem though are Tactical Tech, who are in the final stages of releasing a **Mobile Advocacy Toolkit**, something I've been more than happy to help develop. Finally, NGOs have a place where they can find out what tool is being used to do what, think about how they may apply it in their work, and then go out and use it. Right now it's not perfect, and many of the tools are difficult to set up, configure and use, but that will change. This is a start, and full marks to Tactical Tech for being so proactive.

The central thinking behind **FrontlineSMS**, developed back in 2005, was to fill a growing need for a plug-and-play texting solution for NGOs, and one which required them to have little or no technical expertise. It was designed to be the 'Swiss army knife' of SMS applications. In other words, as a tool it would allow messages to be sent and received into a central hub, using an attached mobile device, and provide some additional basic functionality. It was never promoted as a single solution to any one particular problem. The message to grassroots NGOs was simply this – "if you've read about mobiles and all the great things they're doing, and you want to do something yourself, then try this. It's free, and it's easy, and other people are managing to do some quite interesting stuff with it".

In the first two years since its release, FrontlineSMS has been used by NGOs in over forty countries for a wide range of activities including blood donor recruitment and assisting human rights workers, to promoting government accountability, keeping medical students informed about education options, providing security alerts to field workers, election monitoring, the capture and exchange of vegetable (and coffee) price information, the distribution of weather forecasts, the co-ordination of healthcare workers, the organising of political demonstrations,

the carrying out of surveys and the reporting and monitoring of disease outbreaks. In 2007 it was used to help citizens monitor the Nigerian elections, reported by the [BBC](#), and more recently in Pakistan it was used by activists to circumvent government reporting restrictions. It is this incredible flexibility which has been the key to its success, and the reason the [MacArthur Foundation](#) stepped in to fund the development of the next version, due for release this spring. It's the perfect application for the **green** section of the long tail.

But what about NGOs that don't even have access to laptop computers, mobile phones, GSM modems or the funds to run a mobile project? FrontlineSMS is of no use to them. In an effort to step back from the problem even further, last October saw the launch of [nGOMobile](#), a competition which awards laptop computers, mobile phones, modems, software and cash to grassroots NGOs who want to use mobile in their work but lack the resources. It is a little unique since it awards prizes based on what NGOs are *going* to do, rather than what they've *done*.

After three months we received entries from over seventy NGOs around the world. It was fascinating to take the pulse of the grassroots community, to hear from *them* how *they* wanted to use mobile. This is very different from

traditional surveys which concentrate on what people have *done*. The breakdown of focus areas was also significant. Conservation, which has generally been the slowest discipline to embrace mobile solutions, represented 18% of entries. Only health came slightly higher.

And the winners? Well, we have projects from **Kenya, Uganda, Mexico** and **Azerbaijan** looking to work with local communities to promote the protection and sustainable use of environmental resources; another planning to launch an SMS-based service for rural communities allowing them to ask a range of water-based questions on topics such as sanitation, hygiene, water harvesting and water technologies; one seeking to help rural Central American and Mexican communities solve problems of deforestation, poverty, malnutrition, unemployment and the marginalisation of women; and another seeking to help grassroots and politically excluded people understand their human and legal rights, and to engage them further in the political process.

Mobile clearly has huge potential as an agent for positive social change. But let's not forget that it doesn't come without its problems. As a community we need to look hard at *what* we're doing, ask *why* we're doing it, and *who* we're doing it for. After all, as the nGOMobile competition seems to prove, social mobile is not about a lack of ideas or a lack of understanding, but a basic lack of tools...

