

Throughout the 3 days of CTA's [2009 ICT Observatory](#) , mobile services were discussed from many different angles. The enthusiasm for mobile phones is great, but it seems that a breakthrough and massive adoption of mobile services is yet to come. Nevertheless, in comparison with personal computers, mobile phones will still make a big difference, particularly in developing countries. Why is this?

Here are a few observations which were made by the participants during the Observatory meeting:

- Mobile phones reach more people than ever before, even in remote areas.
- People can interact from anywhere. Mobile phones are all purpose tools for documenting, publishing or analyzing information.
- The adoption of mobile phones is much easier compared to computers - mobile phones have become a tool of daily life for millions of people in developing countries.
- There is a wave of demand driven innovations around mobile phones especially at the local level.
- The mobile phone will be a key tool – on the [bottom of the pyramid](#) to gain access to the Internet.

Prior to mobile phones, all information and communication technologies (ICTs) – with the exception of radio, TV and other traditional media – were dependent on some kind of access through computers, which are still not widely available in developing countries. Nowadays, with mobile phones potential audiences can be reached in remote areas through calls or short messages. The former “unconnected” are now “connected”. A new communication channel is now open – organizations can reach and interact more easily with their stakeholders. But how can mobile phones be used for such services? How can a potential service be developed? What are the different possibilities? At the ICT Observatory many of these issues were discussed and possible solutions proposed.

What to offer?

There are fascinating initiatives working on mobile services such as m-banking, m-government, m-health or m-learning. [A helpful overview is in the ICT observatory wiki](#) . Some of these services focus on the national level, others on a smaller scale such as the local context. Therefore, the context is the key for identifying mobile applications and services. For many of these services, local content is essential but not a prerequisite. Whereas market information services rely on local product prices, coordination between health workers and hospitals is limited to a certain area.

[English courses through mobile phones can be potentially offered throughout a country](#)

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How to reach your audience?

Of course there is also a technical dimension, which can get complex if your service does not work with the most pervasive channel: Short Message Service (SMS). To establish such a service is easier than ever – you can build a quick SMS gateway to receive and send SMS's to and from a larger audience simply with a notebook and a mobile phone (e.g. through [Frontline SMS](#)).

But if your messages cannot be limited to 160 characters, then you need to use other channels, but with undoubtedly a smaller audience:

- Mobile data:

An often cheaper alternative for users is data transfer instead of short messaging. For example [Mxit](#)

in South Africa, a mobile social network, which consists of a mobile phone based chatting service, relies completely on data transfer. This allows longer texts to be delivered and received more cheaply. Such mobile data transfer is processed, for example, through a small mobile phone application.

- Mobile web:

Another option is a mobile website, which can be accessed easily through mobile phones. As mobile phones offer increasingly additional features, it becomes easier to browse the web. But so far mobile web offers are rather limited to either WAP enabled or smart phones. Nevertheless, the exponential growth rates in Africa, for example, show that the mobile web will be widely available in the future. A recent study stated that mobile social networks [will grow ten fold until 2015 in Africa and Latin America](#)

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- Mobile applications:

A fairly new development – most famous at the iPhone apps store – are mobile software applications. The [EPROM initiative](#) in Kenya had already shown some years ago how

applications can be programmed even for low cost phones or in a SIM card. The challenges for such applications are the different mobile phone models, operation systems and the access to such software. You need a space such as a website or mobile provider to offer such applications or transfer them to a mobile phone.

Often, many of the existing services do not address challenges such as literacy, as a recent study in Asia found. For example, application interfaces were deemed overly complicated and heavily text based and users were therefore [reluctant to use these services](#) . Cost and electricity failures are also factors that limit applications from being used on a mass scale.

Is it sustainable? How to finance mobile services?

With all ICT4D approaches it is important to focus on sustainable services right from the start. For example, if one offers a service with free SMS, then people are much likelier to participate. How can these expenses be financed in the long run? What is the business model behind it? This needs serious consideration in strategies for generating sufficient revenue to maintain services where needed. During the ICT observatory, it was suggested that harnessing multiple stakeholder support was essential. However not all services can be financially self sustaining such as public services, which need continuous funding, such as HIV/AIDS counselling through mobile phones.

An interesting business model comes from India and is called [SMSOne](#) . It invests in local citizen reporters, who gather local data for potential information services, which are then sent out with additional advertisements in a short message . Thus the information service gives an income to the local reporter, the company and the subscriber get relevant news, for example when a local water pipe is running again.

On the other hand, some donor funding is often short term, and characterized by abrupt termination and it frequently places an unrealistic emphasis on the rapid scaling up of project innovations.

An important step is achieved when a critical mass of people use a mobile service and it addresses certain needs. That is one step towards a sustainable project, but revenue of some terms is essential too, if the project cannot (or must) be solely publicly funded.

Here are some options to finance mobile services:

- SMS based services – can be financed through premium SMS's, which are slightly more expensive. For premium service revenue is shared between the service and the mobile providers. SMS's can also be subsidized and offered more cheaply through short code numbers such as 9999.
- Subscription service. This option foresees that users pay a continuous fee to receive information such as job alerts.

- There are experiments of advertisement through short messages, as an addition to information or in a mobile application.
- Another revenue could be the sale of an application, which is still a new phenomenon.

How do you promote your service?

A key challenge is the promotion of such services – how for example can an organization get mobile phone numbers of people in a certain areas to alert potential clients? Will your audience react to a poster campaign? Traditional media might be an alternative channel such as radio. You certainly need to partner with other organizations and their networks to promote your service depending on who you need to reach.

These are just some important aspects one has to look at when elaborating a mobile service. What are your experiences?

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