

An Indian-Australian research partnership

Mobiles for Development

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The problem

Mobile phones and other mobile devices provide a range of advantages to their users, but in poor regions they are an expensive luxury. If provided cheaply, how can they help in poor urban and rural parts of India? Little is known about their community benefits in developing regions of the world. In developed countries they are used for communicating, entertainment, education, informing, transmitting knowledge, and learning. There are 80 million current mobile users in India. In developing regions it is believed that they can help with identifying small business opportunities, seeking advice with agricultural problems in the field, finding work, identifying workplaces which provide better wages and conditions, keeping up with price data for selling produce, distributing produce, buying and selling, keeping in touch with distant family and friends if a labourer is migratory, forming social networks in unfamiliar places, conducting romantic relationships, exchanging congratulatory greetings from a distance on ceremonial occasions, managing political actions, and so on.

Some obvious advantages of the mobile phone are that illiterate people can use it, it is cheaper than the Internet, portable and easier to use. The broad benefits of information and communications technologies (ICTs) for social, economic and political development are very clear. A recent European Union study showed that ICTs contributed 50% to EU productivity growth between 2000 and 2004. *The Economist* (2005) estimates that the mobile phone has twice the impact on developing economies as it has on developed countries.

The project

The project focuses on how mobile phones enhance opportunities for self-employment and bring other social benefits to the poorest households and communities in urban and rural areas in India. Using information systems frameworks, fieldwork interviews and case studies, a research PhD candidate will try to find answers to the following questions in India:

1. What technologies are used for the deployment of mobile phones in less developed regions currently?
2. For what purposes are mobile phones used predominantly?
3. What government or market-place policies (or absence of policies) affect mobile markets and use?
4. What overall economic and social benefits flow from usage? Do micro-businesses, home-based businesses, with self-employed family members, benefit in special ways?
5. What corruption is involved at the local level (for example, costs of locating microwave repeater stations) and how much does this cost the poor?
6. What are the implications of more and more affordable and more functional mobile phones and portable devices to lower the costs of computers overall for the poor?

Expected outcomes

The findings of this project will inform policy development at local and national levels, provide groundbreaking useability data to mobile companies which operate in India, and help to guide non-government and aid organizations in directing their community support more effectively.



Research staff from Monash University, Australia and South Africa (left), visit an Agricultural Research Station, with the Director (right), in Maharashtra state, India.



A fisherman on a mobile phone while still at sea near Kochi, India (Tribune 22 June 2004).

Visit: <http://www.ccnr.net.au>.

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