

# Mobiles give Africa's farmers the chance to set out their stall

The latest technology is enabling villagers to bypass middlemen and find out the prices their crops will command

David Smith in Katine  
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Every week without fail, sellers come to trade their meat, vegetables or animals in the dusty marketplace of Katine in north-east Uganda. Yet a closer look reveals something unusual: a series of stalls with pulped wood awnings supported by crooked tree branches. Within each there is someone in a chair receiving a haircut. More unexpected are a dozen or so mobile phones, each connected by a wire to a car battery, which gives the handsets a much needed recharge.

Along with the odd Premier League football shirt, mobile phones are an incongruous glimpse of modernity amid the daily struggle for money and food in Katine. They are also a crucial component in the livelihoods strategy of the African Medical and Research Foundation (Amref) and its partner Farm-Africa in Katine, backed by donations from Observer and Guardian readers and Barclays.

In the coming months Amref plans to issue farmers with mobiles, with a noticeboard and a calculator, and take them on a visit to a town market. The hope is that they will be better equipped for agricultural marketing, in which the technology is increasingly crucial.

A phone typically costs 30,000 Ugandan shillings (£9.58) and call charges in Uganda are high. Network coverage in Katine is patchy but adequate, while charging phone batteries is a problem because the village is not connected to the national grid. But technology tends to find a way, thanks to those charging stations at the Tuesday market and at other trading posts.

Matthew Elesu, 27, wearing an Arsenal shirt, explains that he buys a car battery from the town of Soroti for 150,000 shillings (£48). The journey there and back costs 4,000 shillings (£1.28), four times what it was only a couple of years ago. Elesu then charges 400 shillings (13p) to charge a phone, which usually takes four hours. The margins are slight. "I make money, but only enough to buy some bread," he says.

Among the customers is Florence Eibu, 47, a trader who buys millet in Katine and sells it to markets in the capital, Kampala. "I charge my mobile here every Tuesday and it lasts all week," says Eibu, who travels 4km by bike. "I need it to do business. I use the phone to communicate with people in Kampala: for example, how many sacks do you want? It means I can stay at home, which is where I want to be. I have children to look after and school fees to pay."

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Much has been written about the mobile phone revolution sweeping Africa and its potential to spur development. In the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, with a population of 60 million, there are just 10,000 fixed-line telephones, but more than one million mobile subscribers. In Chad, the fifth-least-developed country in Africa, usage jumped from 10,000 to 200,000 in three years. At the end of 2007 there were more than 280 million mobile phone subscribers in Africa, representing a penetration rate of 30.4%.

In regions where there are no fixed landlines, mobiles have been hailed as an opportunity to leapfrog existing technology. Many in the industry predict that many Africans' first experience of the internet will be via a mobile phone.

A phone can be used to call for help in a medical emergency, find information about crop prices, enable cashless transactions and banking services, or simply save someone from making a long journey when the only option is to visit in person. Professor Jeffrey Sachs, a leading development economist and director of the Earth Institute, has said: "The cellphone is the single most transformative technology for development."

The sense of opportunity is evident in Uganda. On the road north from Kampala to the rural sub-county of Katine, numerous buildings have been spruced up and repainted in an eye-catching pink. This is an aggressive marketing stunt by the mobile network Zain, which operates in six Middle Eastern and 16 sub-Saharan African countries. Zain in Uganda ran a lucky dip for subscribers with prizes including fully furnished houses and Honda CRV cars.

Erostus Nsubuga was sales and marketing director of the company when it was known as Celtel. Speaking in Kampala recently, he recalled how 10 years ago it was predicted that Uganda would have 5,000 mobile phone subscribers by 2008. In fact the figure is now close to five million. "It was a total misunderstanding of the market," he said.

Nsubuga is now chief executive of Agro-Genetic Technologies and deals with Ugandan farmers on a regular basis. "I work with rural areas now, and it's amazing that everywhere I go someone pulls out a mobile phone. They are very important because farmers before did not have a clue of where the market was. They could not communicate.

"But now they can call around and know what the prices are. They can call their relatives in town, for example, and ask how much is a bunch of bananas, so they get an idea of what the price is for their produce."

Nsubuga cited the example of an entrepreneur who drives about 30km collecting handsets from users, takes them to town and charges them before returning them for a fee. But he warned of a barrier to mobile phone take-up that is felt keenly in villages. "I think Uganda is ridiculous: the prices are too high. These international companies have to rethink about cheating poor countries. I think we still have the biggest core tariffs in the world today."

On average a minute of airtime can cost 300 to 400 shillings (9p to 13p). As a result people in Katine and elsewhere tend to keep conversations short or engage in "flashing" - calling and hanging up after the first ring. Another cheap alternative is text messaging, but illiteracy is another obstacle for some of the market information services being pioneered by networks in conjunction with NGOs. On the MTN network, for example, selecting "foodnet" brings up a list including beans, cassava, coffee, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, maize, rice and sorghum, with market prices updated daily.

Few people in Katine, however, have the means or finances to make the most of these premium services, which is why Amref's plan to supply handsets is important. Venansio Tumuhaise, Amref's project officer, said: "These farmers are vulnerable to middlemen who say, 'this product has died, there is no market at all, so you had better sell to me'. This is how they exploit them. A market information system for farmers would include a board displaying market prices for produce."

With careful management, the mobile phone revolution could be about to reach Katine, too.

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